



Information

Associated Names :

I Became an All-stats Infinite Elf

올스탯 무한 엘프가 되었다

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Synopsis :

I became an all-stats infinite elf.

[Stats] Strength: 9999999...

Agility: 9999999...

Vitality: 9999999...

Magic Power: 9999999...

Combat Power: 9999999...

Defensive Power: 9999999...

Chapter 0 : Prologue

A routine that repeats every day like a squirrel running on a wheel.

There is no realization of boredom. Just living a familiar day in a familiar way.

A government job with stable income, no experience in relationships, and no particular thoughts of marriage. No family to support and not many friends either.

To others, it might seem like a lonely life, but he was more or less satisfied. Perhaps it was even fortunate that there were no troublesome or tiring matters.

A calm life, like a still lake. Simply peaceful and uneventful.

After work, he returns to his apartment, solves dinner with a convenience store meal, and occasionally orders delivery.

On weekends, he lies on the sofa engrossed in movies or dramas, reads books at the library, or takes walks in the park.

He doesn't drink or smoke. But he does play games.

For him, games were quite an exciting activity in his life.

His favorite was games where he could adventure through unfamiliar worlds.

Following the narrative of a character and exploring a strange world was quite enjoyable. In reality, he had never even stepped out of his neighborhood.

Recently, after clearing the game he had been enjoying and watching its ending, he started a new game today.

It was a game where he could freely explore a fantasy world with swords, magic, different races, and monsters, just his style.

When he launched the game, the character selection screen appeared with a fresh BGM.

Not creating, but selecting.

There was no customization. He could only choose from already determined characters.

There were five character types.

Warrior, Thief, Archer, Mage, Priest.

Without hesitation, he chose the Mage. Whenever he played this kind of game, he always picked the Mage.

It was because he liked area-of-effect spells. Sweeping through mobs with such spells gave him a bit of a thrill.

The graphics in this game were excellent, so he had many expectations for it.

The only disappointing part was that the Mage character was a girl. He stared blankly at the character.

The character's name was Ariel.

Silver hair and red eyes. With pointed ears, she was probably an elf. Her height and build were petite, and she looked young enough to be ambiguously categorized as a young girl.

He hesitated a little. She was cute, but his preference was for a more reliable and robust character.

That way, he wouldn't feel uneasy during adventures. Well, it was just a game, after all, and the appearance didn't matter much, but that's just how he felt.

"Guess I have no choice."

He sighed softly and chose 'Ariel.'

[Name]

Ariel

[Class]

Mage

[Skills]

Magic Missile

Shield

[Stats]

Strength: 0

Agility: 0

Stamina: 0

Intelligence: 0

Attack: 0

Defense: 0

Stat Points: 10

He was initially given 10 stat points.

He could freely distribute these to choose which part of the character would have strengths.

According to the explanation, investing in Strength and Intelligence increases Attack Power, while investing in Agility and Stamina increases Defense.

He decided to raise his Attack Power. In the early stages, it's advantageous to increase Attack Power. That way, he could progress through the story quickly and level up. Defense could be taken care of slowly later.

Being a Mage, he didn't need Strength, so he invested everything in Intelligence.

As Intelligence increased, so did Attack Power.

Both increased in equal proportion to 10.

He was about to create the character. He wanted to venture into the fantasy world quickly.

But then, he noticed the Intelligence stat changing.

20, 30, 40, 50.

It was increasing at a very fast rate.

200, 300, 400, 500...

Attack Power was also increasing at the same rate.

2000, 3000, 4000...

There seemed to be no end.

He felt both absurd and a little scared.

The constantly rising Intelligence and Attack Power eventually turned into these numbers.

Intelligence: 9999999...

Attack Power: 9999999...

He stared at the screen with a feeling of emptiness.

It seemed like he had encountered a bug. It was a simple problem.

Restarting the game would solve it.

He was about to forcibly close the game.

But just before he did, he stopped his hand and looked back at the screen.

For some reason, he felt like starting the game just like this.

The game might become boring, but his goal was adventure, not leveling up.

With such overwhelming Attack Power, wouldn't the adventure be easier?

"I'm going with this."

He grabbed the mouse with a determined look. He was about to press the character creation complete button.

But then, something else caught his eye again.

Stat Points: 10

"???"

The stat points given had already been used. Since he had invested everything in Intelligence, the number had changed to 0.

So why was it back to 10?

He decided not to think too deeply. Anyway, it was already a buggy state. Whatever it was, he had points to spend again, so he just needed to increase them again.

This time, he added everything to Stamina.

As Stamina increased, so did Defense.

And the same thing happened again.

100, 200, 300, 400...

Endlessly increasing Stamina. Defense was rising similarly.

Having become somewhat accustomed to it, he crossed his arms and quietly watched the screen.

Strength: 0

Agility: 0

Stamina: 9999999...

Intelligence: 9999999...

Attack Power: 9999999...

Defense: 9999999...

Health, Intelligence, Attack Power, and Defense had reached infinity. Only Strength and Agility were still 0.

He felt a bit dissatisfied. He developed a compulsion to make all the numbers the same now that it had come this far.

As if recognizing this desire, the stat points changed back to 10.

“Alright.”

Satisfied, he invested equally in Strength and Agility.

Thus, a character with infinite stats in all categories was created.

[Name]

Ariel

[Class]

Mage

[Skills]

Magic Missile

Shield

[Stats]

Strength: 9999999...

Agility: 9999999...

Stamina: 9999999...

Intelligence: 9999999...

Attack Power: 9999999...

Defense: 9999999...

He nodded with satisfaction.

An all-stat infinite character. How strong would this be?

At this point, the class didn't matter.

He could easily dominate as a Priest too.

But if that's the case, was there any reason to play as a Mage?

Should he switch to a Warrior character with a more robust appearance?

Such thoughts crossed his mind, but he shook his head.

If he went back to the character selection screen, the bug might be fixed. Besides, it was also a hassle to raise the stats again.

"I'm sticking with this."

With a determined expression, he moved the mouse again and pressed the character creation complete button.

Click.

Chapter 1 : Adventure (1)

Blue sky. Warm sunlight. A gentle breeze.

It was a peaceful lakeside.

At that lakeside, a young girl stood dazed, staring blankly at her reflection on the water's surface.

A small frame. Shining silver hair. Eyes as red as blood. Pointed ears...

It was Ariel.

Ariel's face was expressionless, but inwardly, she was quite flustered.

The moment she pressed the character creation complete button, her consciousness disappeared.

When she opened her eyes again, she was here at this lakeside.

As the character "Ariel."

It was a situation where she couldn't accept reality at all.

That's why Ariel just stood there, doing nothing, blankly staring at the surface of the lake.

She stayed like that for quite a while.

If this was a dream, she thought she would wake up, but the only thing that changed was the position of the clouds.

Finally, after several hours had passed, Ariel accepted reality. She acknowledged that she had become possessed by a game character.

"Status window..."

Ariel muttered softly.

Her voice was dry and androgynous.

It wasn't lively, but it was clearly the voice of a child.

Without caring, Ariel checked the status window in front of her.

[Name]

Ariel

[Class]

Mage

[Skills]

Magic Missile

Shield

[Stats]

Strength: 9999999...

Agility: 9999999...

Stamina: 9999999...

Intelligence: 9999999...

Attack: 9999999...

Defense: 9999999...

The stats were exactly as they had been when the bug occurred.
All stats were infinite.

Ariel felt relieved inside.

If her stats had been weak, she might have felt despair.

Since she was already stuck as a game character, having infinite stats would be an advantage no matter what she did.

Perhaps because she checked her stats, Ariel felt her body was different from before.

She felt overflowing with energy. She thought she could lift a massive rock and throw it or run all day without getting tired.

It made sense, given that her Strength and Stamina stats were infinite.

This time, Ariel checked her skills.

[Skills]

: Magic Missile

: Shield

She only had two skills. These were the basic skills given when creating a character.

Magic Missile was an attack skill, and Shield was a defense skill.

Honestly, they were unnecessary.

With infinite attack and defense power, was there any need to use skills?

For that reason, the fact that her class was a Mage was also meaningless.

Ariel waved her hand and dismissed the status window.

She was satisfied with her stats and skills for now.

Now it was time to check something else.

“Inventory.”

At that moment, a virtual space unfolded in Ariel’s consciousness.

A void of nothingness.

She could intuitively tell that this was a space where she could store things. It was what one would call an inventory in a game.

As the inventory opened in her consciousness, its features and usage flowed into her mind.

An inventory was a given system in a game, but in reality, it was much more practical.

Since it was connected to her consciousness, there was no worry about theft. She could easily put in or take out items whenever she wanted without the hassle of carrying them.

Thanks to her Stamina stat reaching infinity, there were no limits on weight or volume.

If she wanted, she could store an entire building.

However, she couldn’t store living creatures. That was because time did not flow inside the inventory.

The moment something entered the inventory, the flow of time would stop.

That was definitely an advantage. If she put food inside, it would

never spoil. She could pile up mountains of food and take it out fresh whenever she wanted.

After finishing her inventory check, Ariel began to walk.

It was still hard to believe that she had become a game character, but there was no need to overthink it.

After all, the goal of the game was adventure.

If she had become a game character, she just had to go on an adventure herself.

And so, Ariel's adventure began.

The first thing Ariel encountered while walking through the forest was a troll.

A vicious monster with pink skin and a massive body.

Ariel stared blankly at the troll. The feeling was completely different from seeing it on a game screen.

First of all, its size was overwhelming.

It seemed to be about 5 meters tall. She had to tilt her head back to see the troll's face.

The troll's face wasn't exactly handsome. It looked brutish and dumb. Its large eyes rolled around, and it grinned foolishly, which seemed almost comical.

Of course, the troll was a powerful monster, a top predator in the forest.

Ordinary beasts like wolves or bears would run away with their tails between their legs the moment they encountered a troll.

The troll was muscular overall, holding a club larger than Ariel's body in its hand.

"Rooooaar!"

The troll roared at Ariel.

A tremendous roar.

It felt like the whole forest was shaking, and startled birds flew up

around them.

But Ariel didn't move at all. She just continued to stand there, staring at the troll.

The troll didn't like that.

To meet a young elf in the forest who reacted so nonchalantly to seeing him was unusual. Typically, when he roared like this, they would collapse in place, wetting themselves in fear.

The troll approached Ariel. He didn't like her reaction, but he thought she'd taste good. Elf flesh was tender, making it a delicacy for trolls.

"Hey, elf kid! Don't just stand there stupidly, run away!"
A voice called out at that moment.

Ariel tilted her head in confusion and looked around.

"What are you looking around for? If you don't want to get eaten, run now!"
The voice came from the direction of the troll.

Of course, it wasn't the troll speaking.
From the drooling, foolish expression on the troll's face as it stared at Ariel hungrily, it was clear it didn't possess the intelligence to speak.

"Run away!"

Ariel's gaze fell on the troll's waist.
There, a cage-like object was hanging, and inside it was a small human trapped.

A human with blue hair and wings, no larger than a finger.

"A fairy..."
Ariel muttered dryly.

According to the world settings she had skimmed before starting the game, many races existed in this world.
Fairies were a race belonging to the fairy clan, tiny as a finger with wings on their backs and a sparkling body.

They were known for being chatty and loving alcohol and flowers. Moreover, fairies had the ability to sprinkle sparkling dust with various effects, such as healing, flight, sleep, and so on.

Because of this dust, fairies were precious, which is why humans were so desperate to catch them.

When captured, fairies were put in cages, but ordinary cages wouldn't do.

Fairies could sprinkle their flying dust and escape with the cage, so magic cages were used instead. Only those authorized could open the door, and the fairy's flying dust wouldn't work inside.

The fairy's body itself and the magic cage were very expensive, but if one could continuously extract the fairy dust, it was a highly profitable business.

Of course, fairies were an active race, so they often died quickly if confined in a cage.

Despite this, humans frequently captured fairies to use them as dust dispensers or to keep them as ornamental pets.

In any case, the troll had such a magic cage hanging from its waist. The voice telling Ariel to run was coming from the fairy trapped inside that cage.

For some reason, a troll with no intelligence was carrying a magic cage around its waist, suggesting some unusual circumstances.

But Ariel couldn't continue her thoughts.

The troll had already raised its club high over her head.

"You idiot! Fool! Run away!"

The fairy inside the magic cage shouted desperately, and the troll swung its club down.

Boom!

A cloud of dust rose thickly, and the wind generated by the blow shook the grass and branches around.

A troll's strength is strong enough to snap a bear's spine. Having swung the club down with such immense force, it was logically impossible for Ariel to still be alive.

"Haah..."

The fairy trapped in the magic cage let out a sigh of resignation. She was sure Ariel had been crushed like a squashed tomato. Now, she would just be another meal for the troll.

"She was just a young elf who hadn't fully grown yet..."
Elves, like fairies, were a race of the forest.

Unlike humans, they were not greedy and, like fairies, were pure beings who loved the forest.
Of course, the idea that fairies were pure was a bit of a misconception that only fairies themselves believed.

Fairies were often deceitful, skilled at lying and trickery, and they even loved alcohol, so it was a bit of a stretch to call them pure. Yet fairies liked to think of themselves as pure beings like elves.

Someone might look at these fairies and tell them not to subtly latch onto the reputation of elves, but there was no one here to say that now.

As the dust gradually settled, the place where the troll had swung its club came into view.

The fairy closed her eyes.
She thought it would be better for her mental health not to see the gruesome death of that cute elf.

"Grrh?"

At that moment, the troll let out a bewildered sound, prompting the fairy to open her eyes.

"Huh?"

And then, like the troll, the fairy also let out a dumbfounded sound.
At the spot where the troll had swung its club, the young elf, who

should have been utterly crushed, was standing there intact.

She had the same expressionless face as before, and the only thing that had changed was her posture.

She had moved from a standing position to a defensive posture, raising her arms to block the blow.

The fairy thought it was foolish to believe the young elf could block a troll's strike with those slender arms.

But in reality, the young elf was perfectly fine, without a scratch.

"You, you, what... are you okay?"

The fairy asked in disbelief. At that moment, the troll raised its club again, and the fairy, becoming frantic, shouted once more.

"R-run away!"

Perhaps it was a coincidence earlier.

Maybe the troll's club had just missed by chance, or some one-time defensive magic had activated. In any case, this time could really be dangerous.

But again, the young elf didn't move, even as the troll's club came crashing down.

Boom!!

Another deafening sound resonated.

Chapter 2 : Adventure (2)

When the troll first swung its club, Ariel raised her arm to defend herself.

It wasn't something she particularly intended to do.

Ariel had been distracted by the fairy, and when the club approached, she instinctively raised her arm.

With a thunderous boom, the wind blew fiercely around her. The troll's club was probably quite powerful.

However, it did no harm to Ariel. She felt the club make contact with her arm, but that was all.

There was no damage. She didn't feel any pain, nor was she injured.

Considering Ariel's defense stat, the outcome was understandable.

Defense: 9999999...

With infinite defense, it made no sense for her to be hurt by the troll's club.

"Grrh?"

"Huh?"

Both the troll and the fairy let out bewildered sounds.

They were stunned because Ariel, who should have been crushed, was standing there perfectly unharmed.

The troll raised its club again, and the fairy shouted at Ariel to run away.

Ariel looked up and watched the troll's club coming towards her.

It was a terrifying sight, but she knew it wouldn't harm her. No matter what the troll did, it couldn't hurt Ariel.

Even so, Ariel decided to move.

Her defense had been proven; now it was time to test her attack power.

Just before the troll's club made contact, Ariel's figure vanished, leaving only a blur behind.

She moved at nearly the speed of sound.

Thanks to her infinite agility, Ariel could move at any speed she desired.

The troll's club struck where Ariel had been standing.

Boom!!

The sound was even louder this time, and the ground caved in under the force.

The troll chuckled, shaking its shoulders. It was sure that this time, the young elf had been crushed into a bloody pulp.

If the troll had been a bit more intelligent, it would have noticed that nothing had connected with its club and would have been puzzled.

But the troll was a very low-intelligence monster.

All it could do was drool at the thought of tasting the young elf.

As the troll waved its hand to clear the dust, the spot where the club had hit the ground was revealed.

There was nothing there. Only a deep depression in the ground.

"Grrh?"

The troll was even more confused. The young elf hadn't disappeared before, though it was strange that she was unharmed. At least she had been standing in place.

But now she was gone without a trace. To the low-intelligence troll, this was like magic.

The troll rolled its large eyes around, searching for the young elf.

And soon, it found her.

The young elf was now perched in a tree, looking down at the troll with the same calm expression as before.

The troll grew angry. It was frustrating that it couldn't just eat the young elf as it wanted.

“Rooaaar!”

The troll charged at the young elf with a fierce roar, one of its signature moves.

Even as the troll charged, the young elf remained unfazed. She simply waited for the troll to approach, then drew back her arm and thrust her fist forward.

To the troll, the young elf's fist looked very small. Surely, being hit by that tiny fist would only tickle.

Moreover, the troll's hide was exceptionally tough, even among monsters. Most weapons wouldn't even leave a scratch.

The troll found the situation more amusing than anything else.

That was the troll's last thought.

With a soft thud, the troll's head disappeared.

Red rain fell in the lush forest.

The rain was mixed with soft chunks and bone-like fragments.

It was the result of the troll's head disappearing.

The red liquid that poured down was blood, and the soft chunks were brain matter.

Ariel stood in the rain of red, reflecting on what had just happened.

Just moments ago, after dodging the troll's club, Ariel had climbed up a nearby tree.

Then, she waited for the troll to approach before thrusting her fist at it.

She hadn't particularly controlled her strength. She just casually threw her punch.

However, the power was beyond imagination. The moment Ariel's fist connected, the troll's head exploded like a watermelon.

The troll, now headless, collapsed and stopped moving.

Ariel was certain now. Her attack power was also unquestionably infinite.

Having confirmed this, she decided to continue her adventure.

"W-wait a minute!"

As she was about to walk away, a voice called out from behind her.

It was the fairy from before.

"Are you really just going to leave, ma'am? We're both forest folk, right? Like, we're practically family. Please, get me out of here!"

The fairy was desperate. If Ariel left her behind, who knew what fate awaited her?

She would likely be stuck in the magic cage, unable to escape, and would rot alongside the troll's corpse.

"Please, ma'am!"

At first, the fairy had addressed Ariel in a familiar tone, calling her a "kid," but now she saw that Ariel was a very powerful "ma'am."

She had never seen anything like it before—someone who could crush a troll's head with a single punch. She had never even heard of

such a thing.

Trolls were harder to kill than ogres, primarily because of their unique regeneration ability.

Since trolls could quickly regenerate from most wounds, the best way to kill one was to deliver a fatal blow in one strike.

But that was no easy task.

There were countless instances where someone aiming for the troll's head was caught and became its meal or was struck by the troll's club and killed instantly.

Yet Ariel had dodged the troll's club at an invisible speed and defeated the troll with a light punch.

It was only natural for the fairy to address her as "ma'am" now.

The fairy even pretended to bow inside the magic cage, but Ariel remained indifferent.

Ariel had already decided to help the fairy; it wasn't a difficult task, after all.

She reached for the door of the magic cage, and at that moment, she felt a resistance.

"Ma'am, this door is enchanted. Are you by any chance a mage?"

Ariel nodded. After all, her character's class was technically a mage.

"That's great!"

The fairy clapped her hands.

"You'll need to dispel the magic first. Only then can you open the cage door! Honestly, I don't know how humans even came up with something like this..."

But Ariel simply pulled on the door of the magic cage. Even though she was technically a mage, she didn't know how to dispel magic. She

had no choice but to open it by force.

Crack! Crack!

The magic binding the cage shattered, and the door broke off.

“Huh...?”

The fairy blinked in surprise. Ariel hadn’t shown any signs of dispelling the magic; she had just ripped the door off with brute strength.

Even the troll hadn’t been able to do that.

“So... it was possible to do that by force.”

The fairy scratched her head and exited the magic cage. Then she took to the air with a strong flap of her wings, circling around Ariel.

She was trying to fly with grace, showing off her beauty, but to Ariel, she looked like nothing more than a pesky fly.

“But seriously, you’re really beautiful up close, ma’am. You’re small now, but when you grow up, you’ll probably be an amazing beauty.”

The fairy continued to chatter at Ariel, fluttering around her.

“My name is Rue! May I ask for your name, ma’am?”

“Ariel...”

“Ma’am Ariel! It’s nice to meet you! You were incredible when you killed that troll! That troll had been so rude, carrying me around on its waist for days. It even took me along when it...”

Fairies were naturally talkative, but this one was exceptionally so.

Ariel half-listened to Rue’s chatter as she started to walk away.

In any case, she needed to continue her adventure.

At that moment, Rue grabbed hold of Ariel’s sleeve.

“Ma’am! You’re not just going to leave, are you? That troll’s body is worth quite a bit! Not as much as a fairy, but still, it would fetch a

good price. Letting it rot away like that would be such a waste!”

Ariel paused and glanced back at the troll’s corpse. Was it really worth that much?

“Hm... But it would be tough for you to move that huge thing by yourself. At the very least, you could take some of its blood...”

While Rue was muttering, Ariel casually walked over to the troll’s corpse and reached out her hand.

Rue tilted her head, not understanding Ariel’s actions.

“Ma’am? What are you...”

The next moment, the troll’s corpse vanished without a trace.

“What?!”

Rue’s eyes widened in shock.

“What just happened?”

Ariel had simply stored the troll’s body in her inventory, but to Rue, it was an incomprehensible phenomenon.

Or perhaps, was it possible with magic? Rue wasn’t sure, as fairies only had the ability to sprinkle dust. But with magic, even the most extraordinary things could be possible.

“You can’t try to understand magic with logic.”

That’s what the human mage who captured Lu said not long ago. At the time, it sounded like nonsense, but now it seemed to make sense. Well, that mage got eaten by the troll less than an hour after saying that.

“Sister, where are you headed now?”

Lu flapped his wings as he asked.

“Do you have a goal?”

Ariel stared into the distant sky and answered.

“Adventure...”

At that single short word, Lu’s body began to sparkle with light.

Adventure! What an exciting word!

Lu’s goal was also adventure. The fairy village was peaceful but boring. Unable to overcome that boredom, Lu had run away from the village.

To adventure out into the world!

But it was too dangerous for a fairy to wander alone. Lu was admiring flowers in the forest when he was quickly captured by a human mage.

It happened just one day after he boldly ran away from the fairy village.

“Sister! Take me with you!”

Lu pretended to bow in midair again.

“I can be quite useful, you know! You know fairies have special dust, right? If you get hurt, I can heal you. I can make you fly, or help you sleep comfortably! So please, let me join your adventure!”

Ariel looked at Lu with an expressionless face. Outwardly she showed no interest, but inwardly she was quite intrigued.

Of course, fairy healing dust or sleep dust would be useless for Ariel. With infinite defense, she can’t get hurt, and she sleeps well anyway.

But flight dust piqued her interest. She did want to fly in the sky once.

“Flight dust.”

Ariel held out her hand to Lu, asking for the flight dust.

A happy smile spread across Lu’s face.

Chapter 3 : Adventure (3)

Lu flew above Ariel's head and twirled in the air. Sparkling dust fell from Lu's body and covered Ariel, and soon, Ariel's body began to shimmer as well.

Sprinkling fairy dust was not an easy task for a fairy. It was similar to a mage casting a spell. After a few uses, they would quickly become exhausted.

"Pant, pant..."

Still, Lu felt a sense of satisfaction. Ariel's body was starting to float in the air.

A faint smile spread across Ariel's face, which had previously shown no expression. The ground gradually grew distant, and the tall trees fell below her feet.

As Ariel continued to rise into the air, she could now see a full view of the forest.

A vast and lush forest.

Seeing such a scene from the sky filled her with a sense of awe.

Warm sunlight softly touched her face, and a refreshing breeze lightly tousled her hair.

Ariel, who had been gazing at the forest's scenery, fixed her eyes on a particular spot.

It was a village located in the middle of the forest.

Smoke was rising from the chimneys of buildings that looked like houses, and people were bustling about energetically.

Ariel decided to make that village her destination.

The smoke rising from the chimneys made her feel hungry. To satisfy

her hunger, she needed to buy food, and to buy food, she needed money.

Ariel didn't have any money. But she did have a troll's corpse.

Lu had said that a troll's corpse could be sold for a decent amount, so she thought she could take it to the village and sell it.

The effect of the fairy's flying dust didn't last long. The glowing light on Ariel's body gradually faded, and she slowly began to descend to the ground.

A short while later, Ariel landed on the ground and started walking toward the village.

"Let's go together, ma'am!"

Lu followed closely behind Ariel.

Ariel and Lu arrived at a lakeside. Going to the village was a good idea, but first, they needed to wash up.

Ariel was covered in troll blood. If she went to the village in this state, people would find it suspicious.

Thinking that she should be more careful not to get blood on herself the next time she fought a monster, Ariel jumped into the lake with a splash.

Unlike Ariel, who dove in without hesitation, Lu washed her body cautiously near the edge of the lake.

For a fairy, the lake was dangerous. If she wasn't careful, a fish could leap up and swallow her in one bite.

Many fairies had been eaten like that. Of course, birds often swooped down to eat them, too.

After washing, Lu flew to a nearby rock and sat down, drying herself in the warm sunlight while watching Ariel.

Ariel stood in a spot where the water reached her thighs and

scrubbed the troll's blood off her face. Her wet silver hair glistened in the sunlight.

A gentle smile formed at the corner of Lu's mouth. Though she was calling Ariel "ma'am," in Lu's eyes, Ariel was still a young elf. Regardless of her strength, she was an innocent elf who knew little of the ways of the world. That must have been why she had considered leaving behind the valuable troll's corpse.

Lu felt a protective instinct. No matter how strong Ariel was, she could still be in danger if she didn't know the ways of the world. Lu believed it was her role to guide Ariel to prevent that.

"Ma'am! Don't go too deep! It's dangerous!"

Lu shouted, then cleared her throat with a little cough. It felt a bit awkward. For some reason, she already felt like she had become Ariel's guardian.

Of course, Ariel didn't listen to Lu. She was too busy washing off the troll's blood.

A while later, Ariel finished washing off the troll's blood and walked out of the lake, dripping water.

Lu quickly flew over and wiped the water off Ariel's face with her sleeve.

"Ma'am, let's dry off first. If you go like this, you might catch a cold."

Ariel nodded. She wondered if she could even catch a cold with her defense, but she still didn't like the idea of wandering around soaking wet.

Ariel sat on the rock where Lu had been sitting and dried herself. The sun was warm enough to dry her body quickly.

"Hmm, when we get to the village, I'm going to drink a lot. I haven't had a drink in days, and I feel like I'm going to faint."

Ariel quietly watched Rue as she spoke. Rue's appearance was no different from that of a young boy. He didn't seem like someone who

would enjoy drinking.

Of course, fairies as a race never grew beyond the appearance of boys or girls, so Lu was a full adult.

By that logic, Ariel, too, was a full-grown adult, despite her appearance. She was certainly old enough to drink. Not that she particularly wanted to.

Ariel was more interested in eating something sweet than drinking alcohol. She thought she'd be happy to enjoy cakes or bread with milk.

Rustle.

A sound of leaves crunching came from behind. Ariel and Lu turned around simultaneously.

“Ah...”

There stood a girl. She had brown hair braided on both sides and a face full of freckles.

“An elf...?”

The girl, with her eyes wide open, stared at Ariel's pointed ears. Then she looked at Lu, who was sitting on Ariel's shoulder.

“A fairy...?”

A look of disbelief appeared on the girl's face.

Elves and fairies were not common sights. Both races rarely left their territories.

Even if they did leave, they faced countless dangers, like encountering monsters such as trolls or being captured by greedy humans... There were endless risks.

For these reasons, elves and fairies rarely left their territories, and encounters with humans were infrequent. The girl's surprise was understandable.

In fact, it was the first time the girl had seen an elf or a fairy. She had heard of the existence of elves and fairies and had seen them in picture books, but she had never thought she would see one in person.

Elves, with their beautiful appearance and pointed ears, were a race beloved by the goddess of beauty.

Because of this, they grow but do not age. They stop growing at their most beautiful age and do not change any further.

Fairies were similar. Though fairies stopped aging at the appearance of a young boy or girl, they did not grow old beyond a certain age.

To the girl, the fairy looked quite young, but she wasn't sure about the elf. The elf seemed younger than her by a few years.

Despite that, the elf was certainly beautiful, just like the legends. In the girl's eyes, Ariel looked like a doll.

Her eyes were somewhat lacking in vitality, but her high nose, small, plump lips, round cheeks, pale white skin, and shining silver hair...

Without realizing it, the girl moved closer to where Ariel stood.

And in a trembling voice, she greeted her.

"Hi...?"

The girl's name was Kanna.

Thanks to her cheerful personality, Kanna quickly became friendly with Ariel.

Of course, that was just Kanna's perception. Ariel wasn't particularly interested in Kanna. She just saw her as a freckled girl.

"I see. So, you're on an adventure. That sounds fun. By the way, Ariel, could I touch your ears just once?"

Kanna asked as she looked at Ariel's pointed ears. In fact, she wanted to touch not only the ears but also Ariel's shiny silver hair and

chubby cheeks.

Even though they hadn't known each other for long, Kanna had already become quite fascinated with Ariel.

At that moment, Rue flew over, glaring sternly at Kanna.

"No way! You can't just touch our ma'am's body as you please!"

It was as if she was protecting Ariel.

Lu didn't like Kanna very much. Not just because she was human but also because she was suddenly acting so friendly, which seemed suspicious.

"Oh, okay..."

Kanna awkwardly scratched her cheek. Seeing Lu act so protectively, she thought Lu and Ariel must be very close, probably having spent a long time together.

"I'm sorry."

Kanna apologized. Ariel showed no particular reaction, while Lu wore a slightly haughty expression and asked,

"You're Kanna, right?"

"Yes."

"You came from that village up ahead?"

"That's right. It's Herrington Village. I live there."

Herrington Village was the village Ariel and Lu had seen from the sky earlier.

"Is there anyone in that village who would buy a troll's corpse?"

"A troll's corpse?"

"Yes!"

“Hmm, maybe Mr. Lloyd might...”

“Who is Mr. Lloyd?”

“He’s a merchant who trades in and out of Herrington Village. He mainly deals in spices, but if it’s profitable, he might also deal in a troll’s corpse.”

Apparently, a merchant named Lloyd was currently in Herrington Village.

“Ma’am, that’s what she says. Should we have this girl guide us to Herrington Village?”

At Lu’s question, Ariel nodded, got up from the rock, and stood up.

Lu climbed onto Ariel’s shoulder and shouted at Kanna.

“Hey, human! Lead us to Herrington Village!”

And so, Kanna became their guide to Herrington Village.

As they entered Herrington

Village, following Kanna, the villagers’ eyes turned toward Ariel and Lu.

Just like Kanna, the villagers were seeing an elf and a fairy for the first time.

Receiving the attention of the villagers, Ariel and Lu followed Kanna to Lloyd.

Lloyd was in the village square, talking with some people. As a merchant, Lloyd had at least seen elves and fairies before.

However, those had been elves and fairies sold as slaves in the city, and it was his first time seeing ones like Ariel and Lu freely wandering about.

“You want to sell a troll’s corpse?”

Lloyd looked bewildered at the abrupt mention of selling a troll’s

corpse.

A troll's corpse was extremely hard to come by. To get one, you would need to spend a fortune hiring professional hunters.

It was only natural for Lloyd to be surprised that a young elf and a fairy wanted to sell a troll's corpse.

“Yes! A troll's corpse!”

Lu shouted with her arms crossed. Lu was still inexperienced at talking to humans since it was her first time outside the fairy village. To hide her awkwardness, she kept raising her voice.

“Hm...”

Lloyd stroked his chin, looking back and forth between Ariel and Lu. His expression was one of skepticism.

“So, where is this troll's corpse?”

At Lloyd's question, Kanna glanced at Ariel. She was also curious.

When they talked about selling a troll's corpse, she had brought them to Lloyd, but from the lake to here, Ariel and Lu had been empty-handed. Where exactly was the troll's corpse?

Kanna's curiosity was soon answered. When Ariel stretched her hand forward, a troll's corpse appeared out of thin air.

“Eek!”

“Whoa!”

People around them exclaimed in shock and backed away. Lloyd, too, stared at the troll's corpse with wide eyes.

Though the appearance of the troll's corpse out of thin air was surprising, it wasn't entirely impossible. With magical items, it would be possible to make a troll's corpse appear in such a way.

Of course, that was Lloyd's misunderstanding. No magical item existed in the world that could store something as large as a troll's

corpse.

“Hmm...”

Anyway, Lloyd carefully examined the troll's corpse. He had never dealt with a troll's corpse before, but if he did, he would likely make a profit.

However, this troll's corpse had no head. The eyes, teeth, and skull could all fetch a high price, but those parts were missing.

Still, the other parts were in good condition.

Trolls were so ferocious that their hides often got damaged during hunts, but this troll's body was intact except for the missing head. It seemed as if only the head had been removed with a single blow.

“Even professional troll hunters would find this difficult to achieve...”

Lloyd raised his eyes to look at Ariel and Lu.

Ariel had a blank expression, and Lu was staring at Lloyd, shaking her legs as if bored.

In the end, Lloyd decided to buy the troll's corpse. It seemed a bit strange, but if he could make a profit, there was no reason to hesitate.

He offered a reasonable price. Ariel and Lu didn't know the market value, so they would have accepted whatever he offered, but fortunately, Lloyd was an honest merchant.

After receiving the gold coins from Lloyd, Ariel turned around without a word, followed by Kanna and Lu.

It was a fair and straightforward transaction.

Chapter 4 : Herrington Village

(1)

“Ah! This is the stuff!”

Lu shouted as she emptied her cup.

The cup in Lu’s hand was very small. It was a fairy-sized cup that she had brought with her when she left the fairy village.

Lu filled the cup with fruit wine again. Although she had already drunk several cups, the bottle of fruit wine showed no signs of getting empty. Since it was only a fairy drinking, it was only decreasing in very small amounts.

“This fruit wine is really to my liking.”

The fruit wine Lu was drinking was the most expensive in Herrington Village. Ariel would pay the bill, but she wasn’t too worried. The money they received from selling the troll’s corpse was more than expected.

After selling the troll’s corpse, Ariel and Lu had come for a meal.

The place was an inn run by Kanna’s parents.

Apparently, this was the only inn in Herrington Village.

Ariel and Lu decided to have a meal and spend the night here. They weren’t particularly tired, but since they had come to the village, it wasn’t a bad idea to rest for a day.

The inn was bustling with people. Everyone kept glancing at Ariel and Lu as if they were a rare sight. For the villagers, elves and fairies were indeed unfamiliar beings.

“Why are they staring like that?”

Lu grumbled with dissatisfaction, but Ariel showed no particular reaction. Ariel was a simple-minded person by nature; she didn't care about people's gazes.

Besides, Ariel was currently too busy focusing on the bread placed on the table.

A loaf of bread on a round plate.

It was baked golden brown, steam wafting off it, and it had a fragrant smell.

It was bread that Kanna had recommended. It was filled with cream, and just imagining the taste made Ariel's heart pound.

Ariel grabbed the bread and took a big bite.

Ariel's eyelids quivered slightly.

The soft and sweet cream melted in her mouth.

It was an exquisite taste.

Ariel devoured the cream bread hurriedly. She didn't even notice the cream smeared around her mouth. That's how delicious the cream bread was.

“Ma'am...”

Lu sighed softly, took a tissue, and wiped Ariel's mouth. Then she handed Ariel a glass of milk.

Ariel took the glass and drank the milk down in one go. Lu watched her with a satisfied expression.

She thought to herself, “Despite everything, she's still just a kid, enjoying bread and milk like that.” Lu gulped down more fruit wine, her face already flushed red.

After finishing the cream bread and milk, Ariel felt a bit

disappointed. She wanted to eat more, but her stomach was already full.

“Um...”

At that moment, someone approached and spoke to them. Ariel and Lu looked at the person at the same time.

Standing next to them was an old man with a head full of white hair.

“What is it, old human?”

Lu shouted suspiciously, and the old man bowed his head respectfully.

“I am the chief of this village... I heard that some esteemed guests had arrived, so I came to greet you.”

“Hmm.”

Lu felt a bit proud at the chief's words.

The “esteemed guests” clearly referred to Ariel and Lu.

The chief was the highest authority in the village, and he had come personally to greet them. It was only natural that Lu's shoulders lifted with pride.

Lu crossed her arms arrogantly.

“So, you're the chief of this village?”

“Yes, that's correct.”

“Well, don't be so nervous. My lady and I plan to stay quietly for just one day and then leave.”

“I see... but...”

The chief hesitated for a moment and then asked, “Before that, could I possibly ask you for a favor?”

The chief's request was to find a flower called Patricia. Patricia was very rare and difficult to find.

There was no information on where Patricia grew, and no one sold it.

Even Lloyd, the merchant who traveled between the towns, had tried to find Patricia but failed. It wasn't that the flower was expensive; it just wasn't available anywhere.

"But since you are forest folk, an elf and a fairy, I thought perhaps you might be able to find Patricia..."

The chief bowed his head with a desperate look on his face.

"Please... You are our last hope now..."

"What do you need Patricia for?"

Lu asked, and the chief explained the situation.

"To cure my daughter, Daisy. She has contracted the 'Frozen Sickness,' and it is said she can only be cured by eating the petals of the Patricia flower."

"Frozen Sickness?"

Lu tilted her head in confusion. She had never heard of such a disease.

The chief gave a bitter smile.

"You may not know it. Like Patricia, it is an extremely rare disease... When someone contracts it, their whole body starts freezing, starting from the hands and feet, until they die."

The chief's daughter, Daisy, was currently frozen everywhere except for her heart. She couldn't move or regain consciousness. At this rate, she would soon die.

"We have brought priests from the city and used high-quality potions known for their healing effects, but they have only slightly delayed the symptoms. To completely cure her, we still need Patricia..."

Tears streamed down the chief's cheeks.

“I am an old man with not much time left, so I have no regrets about my life... but I want to give Daisy a chance to live. If you could find Patricia, I would give you all my wealth. Please, I beg of you...”

It wasn't just the chief. By now, other villagers had also gathered around, bowing their heads to Ariel and Lu.

“Please, Elf, Fairy.”

“Daisy is a sweet and lovely child. Please save her. She must not die like this.”

At this point, even Lu couldn't help but feel uncomfortable.

Lu glanced at Ariel. Despite everything, the final decision lay with Ariel.

But...

“Ma'am...?”

Ariel was holding a glass cup in her hand, her eyes closed. Her head tilted slightly to the side, and her shoulders rose and fell rhythmically.

There was even the sound of soft breathing.

Ariel had fallen asleep.

From the moment the chief began speaking, Ariel had felt the symptoms.

After eating the cream bread and drinking the milk, she felt full, and her body began to relax. Her eyes started drooping.

It was post-meal drowsiness.

She had suffered from this before becoming possessed by the game. The symptoms were so severe that she had to take medicine after lunch to function in the afternoon. Otherwise, it would be hard for her to work.

But to think this still applied even after being possessed in the game. Could post-meal drowsiness be a mental condition? Or perhaps just a habit?

In any case, Ariel had fallen asleep while listening to the chief's story. When she didn't wake up for an hour, Lu eventually had to wake her.

"Ma'am..."

Lu carefully tapped Ariel's cheek, and she slowly opened her eyes. The glass cup she had been holding had already been taken away by Lu and placed on the table.

Ariel straightened her body, pretending she hadn't been asleep. Though it was already too late for that.

The chief and the villagers, who were flustered after seeing Ariel fall asleep, had been waiting outside the inn for an hour.

Lu sighed softly and explained the situation to Ariel.

It was exactly as the chief had said earlier.

Lu quickly finished her explanation and shrugged.

"Ma'am, you wouldn't know because you were asleep, but all the villagers came rushing over... It was quite overwhelming. Even though I may not look like it, I'm a kind-hearted fairy. So, ma'am, what will you do? Will you grant the chief's request? I don't really care what happens to humans... but he did say he would give us his entire fortune. I don't know exactly what kind of flower Patricia is, but as a fairy, finding it would be a piece of cake for me."

There was no race more knowledgeable about flowers than fairies. The name might differ, but Patricia was surely a flower Lu knew.

"And well, thinking about it, it seems a bit pitiful... If the whole village wants to find it, then the chief's daughter must be a good-hearted child."

If possible, Lu wanted to accept the chief's request. She had a hard time refusing when people asked her for help.

Lu asked Ariel with a hint of desperation.

“Shall we find the flower?”

“Yes.”

Ariel agreed immediately. Her goal was adventure, after all.

Finding Patricia would also be part of an adventure.

If it involved helping someone in distress during an adventure and there was a reward, there was no reason to refuse.

Ariel and Lu left the inn and met the chief again. When Lu confidently declared that they would find Patricia, the chief and the villagers bowed deeply.

“Thank you so much, Fairy!”

“Thank you!”

Lu blushed slightly and cleared her throat.

“Ahem, ahem, thank my lady instead of me. If she hadn’t agreed, I wouldn’t have moved either.”

“Thank you so much, Elf!”

The villagers bowed again to Ariel, who gave a brief nod in return.

Lu then spoke to the chief.

“By the way, I’d like to know more about the appearance of Patricia. Just hearing the human name, ‘

Patricia,’ doesn’t mean much to me.”

“Oh, yes. I’ll show you.”

The chief took out a piece of paper from his pocket.

It was a drawing of the flower.

The petals were detailed, and the colors were painted.

Lu studied the drawing closely and then looked slightly grim.

The chief asked anxiously.

“Why, why is that?”

“This flower’s name is Patricia?”

“Yes, that’s right...”

“At least, that’s not what we fairies call it.”

“Then...”

“We call it something else.”

Lu continued with a somewhat uneasy expression.

“This is the Corpse Flower.”

A hush fell over the surroundings.

The flower in the drawing was incredibly beautiful, not at all matching the name “Corpse Flower.”

“It’s certainly understandable why it’s hard to find if it’s the Corpse Flower...” Lu muttered seriously. For once, she wasn’t acting flippant or reckless.

“The Corpse Flower only blooms on cliffs. If that were all, it wouldn’t be a big deal—you could just fly over and pick it. But the problem is its blooming period. The Corpse Flower stays in a form similar to a weed most of the time, and then it suddenly blooms.”

Lu pointed at the drawing in the chief’s hand.

“It blooms into this beautiful shape... but it only remains like that for three minutes. Three minutes later, it wilts immediately.”

To summarize, Patricia grows only on cliffs, its blooming period is irregular, and it remains in bloom for only three minutes. It made sense why it was so rare.

“Hm...”

The faces of the chief and the villagers darkened.

If even a fairy knowledgeable about flowers found it difficult to obtain, it felt like their last hope had vanished.

Lu clapped her hands, as if to dispel the gloomy mood.

“Well, don’t be too disappointed. It’s difficult, but it’s not impossible. We fairies can intuitively sense when flowers are about to bloom. The same goes for the Corpse Flower. If I fly around the cliffs and observe, I’ll soon find a Corpse Flower about to bloom. It’s troublesome, but that part is easy. The problem is...”

Why is the beautiful Patricia known as the Corpse Flower among fairies?

That was the real issue.

“The moment a Corpse Flower is picked or plucked, it releases a deadly poison. It’s so potent that it can instantly kill a troll. If you get mesmerized by its beauty and pick it, you’re done for. Any properly trained fairy would never touch a Corpse Flower, but there are plenty of uneducated fairies in the world.”

Countless fairies had died picking the Corpse Flower.

As a result, there were always many fairy corpses around where the Corpse Flower bloomed.

That’s why it was called the Corpse Flower.

“But, well, it should be fine. After all, we have my lady here. If my lady is with us, she’ll have no problem picking the Corpse Flower. She may look delicate on the outside, but she’s the one who defeated a troll with her bare hands.”

“Oh...”

Hope began to return to the faces of the chief and the villagers.

Lu, feeling a bit excited, flew into the air and shouted.

“Just watch! My lady and I will find Patricia by the end of today. We’ll definitely save the chief’s daughter!”

“Hurrah!”

The people cheered loudly at Lu’s words.

Chapter 5 : Herrington Village

(2)

Ariel and Lu left the village with confidence and began searching for Patricia deep in the forest, at the cliff.

There were many monsters living in such places, but it wasn't a problem.

Every monster they encountered was swiftly defeated by Ariel.

Ariel was diligently practicing the lesson she had learned from the troll.

Never damage a monster's head. The monster's head has value.

Damaging it would only reduce its worth.

When they sold the troll, they received less because the head was missing.

So, Ariel jumped high and struck the monster's crown with a knife-hand chop.

This would only impact the brain, allowing the body to remain intact and die without spilling blood.

Ariel easily defeated three Minotaurs this time as well and put their bodies in her inventory.

Minotaurs were large monsters, but Ariel's inventory had no restrictions on volume or weight, so they were stored without any difficulty.

Watching Ariel, Lu clicked his tongue.

This wasn't really a battle. It wasn't even hunting.

It was more like a one-sided massacre.

The monsters, which would usually make Lu tremble in fear just by their presence, now seemed somewhat pitiful.

Whenever Ariel's afterimage blurred, a monster inevitably fell dead. The monsters didn't even seem to realize what was happening to them. They just looked around in confusion before collapsing.

"Sis... didn't you say you were a magician...?"

Of course, Lu knew how Ariel was taking down the monsters. Ariel would jump high and deliver a knife-hand chop to the monster's crown. And that would be it. No magic, just pure brute force.

"So why do you keep... killing them by hitting them...?"

Ariel's answer was simple.

"Just because."

Humans often get lost in the forest.

It's manageable during the day, but at night, they can't tell where they are at all.

To humans, every tree looks the same, and all grass is just grass.

But fairies are different. Being a forest-dwelling race, fairies never get lost in the forest.

They instinctively understand the layout of the forest and can find their way.

So sometimes, when humans get lost in the forest at night, fairies appear to help them.

Just by following the glowing fairies, humans could safely find their way out of the forest. Though nowadays, humans are too busy trying to catch fairies, so such things rarely happen.

In any case, fairies are that familiar with the forest. Even in a new forest, they know where to find things and navigate easily.

Thanks to that, it didn't take long after leaving the village for Lu to find Patricia.

"Sis! I found it!"

Patricia was still in a state of being a weed but looked ready to bloom soon. That was the time to pick it.

Its location was indeed on a cliff, a height where any other creature would fall to their death.

Ariel waited below the cliff, on the ground, while Lu fluttered

around, waiting for Patricia to bloom.
“Hehe, things are going very smoothly.”
Lu was in a good mood.

The villagers had wanted Patricia so desperately but never managed to obtain it.

And yet, Ariel and he had managed to find it so easily; what an impressive achievement.

It would show the dignity of the forest races, the elf and the fairy.

“Oh!”

A faint light started to emanate from the weed-like Patricia. It was blooming.

“Sis! Now’s the time!”

Soon, Patricia fully spread its beautiful petals.

For a moment, Lu almost approached in awe, but he managed to hold back. Getting too close was not a good idea.

Patricia releases a deadly toxin the moment it is plucked or broken.

Even when in bloom, it emits small amounts of poison.

While it wouldn’t be fatal, it could cause headaches and dizziness.

With a leap, Ariel pushed off the ground.

It was a light movement, but Ariel’s body soared several hundred meters in an instant.

Patricia, with its petals fully spread, was flaunting its presence.

Ariel grabbed Patricia by the stem and pulled it out. Immediately, a dull green smoke burst out, enveloping Ariel.

It was a toxic mist.

A deadly poison potent enough to instantly kill any other living creature.

But it didn’t apply to Ariel.

Ariel landed back on the ground as if nothing had happened, holding Patricia in her hand.

“Wow, we did it, Sis!”

Lu flew over and clung to Ariel’s face, rubbing himself against her.

Ariel looked down at the Patricia in her hand.

It was exactly like the picture. Now, they just needed to take it back.

Then, a shadow fell over Ariel's position.

As she looked up, she saw something rapidly descending from the sky.

A winged monster.

It was a wyvern.

In the blink of an eye, the wyvern swooped down, swinging its talons toward Ariel's face.

Ariel wasn't hurt. Not even a scratch.

"Aaah!"

But Lu wasn't so lucky.

Lu, who had been clinging to Ariel's face, was grabbed by the wyvern's talons and carried away.

"S-Sis! Siiis!!"

Lu screamed, struggling.

Even fairies aren't entirely defenseless. When another monster tries to eat them, they can spread powder by flapping their wings.

One of the effective powders is sleep powder.

Monsters hit by sleep powder fall asleep immediately, allowing the fairy to escape.

Under normal circumstances, Lu would have done just that, but it was impossible now.

Being grabbed by the talons and dragged through the sky made it hard to sprinkle sleep powder on the wyvern. He couldn't even move his wings.

Watching Lu being captured, Ariel thought for a moment.

Rescuing Lu would be simple.

All she had to do was jump higher than the wyvern, strike its crown, and it would be over.

But Lu's earlier words about magic crossed her mind.

Come to think of it, she had never used magic before.

Still, since she was a magician, why not give it a try?

Thinking this, Ariel opened her hand.

Though called magic, it was actually a skill.

Ariel had two skills.

Magic Missile and Shield.

What she needed now was the offensive skill, Magic Missile.

It was a basic skill, but since her intelligence and attack power were limitless, she had to adjust the power. Slightly weaker.

Pew!

A blue light shot from Ariel's hand. The light flew like a bullet and pierced the wyvern's head.

That was it.

The wyvern scattered its feathers and plummeted, and Lu, now free, quickly flew back to Ariel.

"Haha, Sis! Thank you! That was awesome!"

Ariel watched the wyvern crash in the distance and suddenly realized something.

Her method of dealing with monsters until now had been highly inefficient.

There was no need to bother striking down with a knife-hand chop. She could just use Magic Missile. It was simpler.

Having learned yet another lesson, Ariel turned her body and started heading back to the village.

Since they had successfully obtained Patricia, the only thing left was to deliver it to the village.

After Ariel and Lu left to find Patricia, the village chief anxiously waited near the village entrance.

Time was running out.

The chief's daughter, Daisy, was already in a state where all her body parts, except her heart, had frozen.

Soon, even her heart would freeze.

With the chief feeling anxious, the mood in the village wasn't bright either. Even the usually bustling tavern was quiet today.

"...I bet they won't come back."

"They say Patricia is a very difficult flower to find."

"Maybe they just left the village altogether..."

The villagers whispered among themselves.

They, too, were worried about Daisy, but they couldn't put too much hope in an elf and a fairy they had just met today. It wouldn't be

strange if Ariel and Lu simply left.

“Oh!”

Just then, a sentry guarding the village’s wooden fence shouted in surprise.

“They’re coming! No, they’ve arrived!”

At his words, the village chief quickly lifted his head, and the villagers also looked ahead.

Something was approaching rapidly from the forest.

An elf with silver hair running against the backdrop of the setting sun.

It was Ariel.

Ariel arrived in front of the chief in an instant. Despite having run with such force, her breath remained calm and steady.

With a nonchalant expression, Ariel held something out to the chief, who took it with trembling hands.

It was the much-desired Patricia.

“H-huh... T-thank you...!”

The chief spoke with a trembling voice, then immediately turned and ran to his house.

There was no time to waste. He had to feed the Patricia petals to Daisy as soon as possible.

The villagers followed the chief, and Ariel and Lu headed that way as well.

People gathered around the chief’s house. Everyone waited with bated breath, hoping for Daisy’s safety.

As the sun set, the street was bathed in a crimson hue, and nobody made a sound.

After a while.

Creak.

The door to the chief’s house opened, and someone stepped out. Her complexion was a bit pale, but she had a bright smile on her face.

It was the chief’s daughter,

Daisy.

That night, a festival was held in Harrington Village. The festival celebrated Daisy's recovery. The villagers gathered in the square to eat, drink, and enjoy themselves to their heart's content. The chief asked Ariel and Lu if there was any reward they wanted. Now that his dying daughter had been saved, he was willing to give his entire fortune. But Ariel wanted nothing special.

What she wanted was quite trivial, considering she had saved Daisy's life.

"Cream bread..."

Ariel wanted cream bread.

The chief blinked, staring at Ariel. He wondered if she was joking, but Ariel's expression was serious.

That really was all Ariel wanted.

After all, she still had money left from selling the troll's body, and there were plenty of monster corpses in her inventory.

"Hmm... Are you sure that's all you want...?"

The chief hesitated. It didn't feel right to offer cream bread as a reward to the savior of his daughter.

"Hey, old human! What do you think of my sister?"

Just then, Lu shouted angrily. He was drunk on fruit wine, his face flushed red.

"Our sister is not greedy like you humans... Don't insult her pure heart...!"

Lu stumbled and fell onto the table, passing out. He was drunk and had fallen asleep.

In truth, Lu's words were just drunken babbling, but the chief felt he had gained a profound insight.

The pure heart of the elf and fairy, the forest races!

He hadn't understood. He had been thinking from a human's perspective.

Elves and fairies are not as greedy as humans. No matter how much money they receive, it doesn't make them happy. To them, money holds no meaning.

They never wanted a reward in the first place. They just helped out

of pure goodwill.

How could he have misunderstood their intentions? The chief reflected on this and bowed his head deeply once more to Ariel and Lu.

“I apologize. I will not mention rewards again. Instead, I will cherish your goodwill for the rest of my life... Truly, thank you...”

The chief, his eyes moist with tears, quickly turned away. Crying at his age was embarrassing, and he didn't want anyone to see him.

Watching the chief's retreating figure, Ariel muttered softly.

“I just wanted cream bread...”

Chapter 6 : Kidnapping (1)

The festival in Herrington Village continued late into the night.

Most of the villagers had gone to the square, leaving the inn run by Kanna's parents unusually quiet. Kanna wanted to go to the square herself, but since her parents had left her in charge of the inn, she had no choice but to stay and keep watch alone.

Still, Kanna was satisfied.

Today's festival was to celebrate Daisy's recovery, and the reason Daisy could recover was thanks to Ariel and Lu bringing back Patricia.

And the one who guided Ariel and Lu to Herrington Village was...

"It was me."

Kanna believed she had made a significant contribution to today's celebration. No one particularly acknowledged this, but Kanna still felt a sense of pride.

Jingle.

The inn door opened, and someone entered. Kanna turned her head toward the door.

"Welcome... Oh!"

The person who came in was Ariel.

Ariel, with the same expressionless face as when they first met, seemed somewhat displeased.

"Ariel. Why are you back already? Wasn't the festival fun?"

At Kanna's question, Ariel nodded and walked quickly over to a table in the inn's dining area.

Kanna approached Ariel.

"Would you like something to eat?"

"Cream bread."

Ariel spoke, putting peculiar emphasis on her words.

Kanna chuckled.

"Didn't you eat anything at the square? I'm sure there are things tastier than cream bread there."

Ariel quietly stared into space. She had asked the village chief for cream bread but was ignored. Moreover, the villagers only expressed their thanks without offering any food.

What Ariel didn't know was that the villagers had been sternly warned by the village chief. They were told to express their gratitude but never to mention rewards or compensation, as that would insult the pure hearts of the elves...

"Huh? Where's Lu?"

When Kanna asked, Ariel rummaged in her pocket and placed something on the table.

It was Lu.

Lu was sound asleep, his face flushed red, having drunk fruit wine to his limit and getting thoroughly intoxicated.

Kanna chuckled again and spoke to Ariel.

"Anyway, I'll get you some cream bread. Just wait a bit."

"Heheh~"

Kanna hummed a tune as she prepared the cream bread.

She felt a bit bored not being able to go to the festival in the square, but being able to stay at the inn with Ariel was much better.

Besides, with Lu passed out from drinking, perhaps she could afford to be a little bold.

She was thinking of slyly asking Ariel if she could touch her ears while she enjoyed her cream bread and milk. If not the ears, maybe she could stroke that shiny silver hair. If not that, at least her cheeks...

“Ooh, smells good, doesn’t it?”

At that moment, someone entered the kitchen and spoke. Startled, Kanna turned to see a familiar face.

“H?”

It was Jack, the blacksmith’s son.

Jack was about five years older than Kanna, making him a young adult in the village.

However, Jack seemed still immature. He wasn’t diligent at work, and he was always busy drinking or chasing after women.

Jack often complained about how he was fed up with living in a backwater place like Herrington Village.

He dreamed of someday going to the city and living a splendid life, but Kanna didn’t think he had much chance. Jack wasn’t particularly skilled at anything.

In short, Jack was the village loafer who always harbored unrealistic dreams.

“That bread, you’re giving it to that elf, right?”

Jack pointed to the cream bread Kanna was preparing, looking quite delinquent with one hand in his pocket and a swaggering stance.

“So what? Why?”

“Give it to me. I’ll take it to her.”

“Why would you? No. Why are you even here? The festival is happening in the square right now.”

“Who cares about that? Who pays attention to such a boring festival? Just give it to me. I have some business with that elf.”

Jack’s lip curled up for a moment, and seeing that, Kanna felt uneasy.

That curling lip was a habit she often saw whenever Jack was about to cause trouble.

Before he set fire to the village fence in a fit of anger after being scolded by the adults or before he sneaked into the village chief’s house to steal valuables, he definitely had that expression.

“Hello, Kanna.”

Someone else entered the kitchen.

This time, it was two people.

Tom and Susan.

Both were part of Jack’s gang.

Tom was a chubby, timid, and naive guy who followed Jack around just because they were friends.

He was like Jack’s foolish subordinate.

And Susan was another troublemaker in the village. She was always flirting with men and trying to cause problems.

Once, she even went to the village chief’s house at night, and though no one knew what she was up to, she got severely scolded by the chief.

Susan was similar to Jack. She found Herrington Village boring and dreamed of one day going to the city to live a splendid life.

Susan was always confident that she could seduce a nobleman if she

made it to the city, but Kanna thought it seemed unlikely. Objectively, Susan wasn't particularly pretty.

Anyway, Jack's gang, the troublemakers of the village, had crowded into the kitchen. They were clearly up to something.

Kanna turned to leave and call for help. She thought of slipping out the back door of the kitchen and running to the square to alert the adults.

"Where do you think you're going!"

But before she could, Jack grabbed her.

Kanna's mouth was covered with a cloth, and her hands and feet were tied with rope before she was shoved into the kitchen storeroom.

"Then you can take a nap in there, Kanna. Stay quiet."

Jack chuckled as he closed the storeroom door. She heard the sound of the door being bolted from the outside.

Kanna was now completely trapped in the dark kitchen storeroom.

"Hi there?"

Susan placed the cream bread and milk on Ariel's table and sat down herself.

"I heard you saved Daisy's life. Thank you so much."

Even though Susan said this, Ariel didn't respond. She simply grabbed the cream bread with a slightly moved expression and gazed at it, paying no attention to Susan at all.

Susan felt a bit annoyed but decided to hold back for the sake of her plan. The cream bread and milk contained a large amount of sleeping medicine.

It wasn't as potent as fairy sleeping powder, but it was strong enough to treat insomnia.

They had mixed plenty into the cream of the bread and thoroughly stirred it into the milk. Once eaten, Ariel probably wouldn't wake up until tomorrow morning.

Ariel began eating the cream bread, stuffing it into her small mouth with great relish. Then, perhaps because her throat felt blocked, she took a sip of the milk.

Susan smiled quietly, and Jack, watching from the kitchen, also smiled.

Good. It was a success. This elf would soon fall asleep. Then they could proceed with their plan.

It was Jack's plan.

The plan was to kidnap the elf and the fairy.

The villagers of Herrington didn't seem to know, but elves and fairies were worth a lot of money. It was enough to buy a noble title.

Jack had learned this from a mercenary who had once stopped by the village.

So, he came up with this plan.

It was reckless, but if they succeeded, their lives would change forever. They would no longer rot away in this backwater village and could live a splendid life in the city.

Jack told Susan and Tom about the plan.

Timid Tom hesitated, but he had no choice. He would do whatever Jack told him to do.

Susan was thrilled. Since she often thought like Jack, it was only natural.

Jack's plan was simple.

They would somehow kidnap the elf and run away to the city. The necessary items were rope, cloth, and the sleeping medicine that

Tom's mother took.

Jack thought it would be best to carry out the plan today. The opportunity was perfect since people were busy celebrating the festival.

While everyone was distracted with drinking, they would discreetly kidnap the elf and the fairy, steal the village's shared carriage, and flee to the city.

Having made his plan, Jack loitered around the square, keeping an eye on Ariel.

And the opportunity soon presented itself.

Ariel had put the fairy in her pocket and was heading somewhere. The destination was the inn.

Jack felt as though luck was on his side. The village's shared carriage happened to be at the inn. They could escape immediately.

Moreover, all the villagers were at the square. The only person in the inn was Kanna.

Jack took Susan and Tom to the inn, which led to the current situation.

As Jack waited at the entrance to the kitchen, Susan came over.

"That elf ate the cream bread and milk and fell asleep. The fairy is completely passed out drunk."

"Is that so?"

Jack's lips curled up once more. It was his plan, but it seemed too perfect. He felt frustrated that his brilliant mind had been wasted in this rural place for so long.

"Let's start. Tom, bring the elf over. Make sure her hands and feet are properly tied. She might struggle if she wakes up. Susan, secure the fairy. Put her in a glass jar or something. Make sure to poke some air holes; we don't want her to die."

“Got it.”

After giving his orders, Jack went out the back door of the inn.

While Tom and Susan handled the elf and the fairy, Jack intended to steal the village’s shared carriage.

To steal it was easy; he just had to take it. There was no lock or anything.

Jack brought two horses from the inn stable and hitched them to the carriage.

The carriage was a valuable communal property of the village, but he didn’t care.

He had no intention of ever returning to this place again.

A little later, Susan and Tom emerged from the back door of the inn.

Susan was holding a large glass jar, and Tom was carrying the elf, who was tightly bound with ropes.

“Let’s go.”

Jack climbed into the driver’s seat, and Susan and Tom got into the carriage.

Jack tugged on the reins, and the horses whinnied as they set off.

Chapter 7 : Kidnapping (2)

Jack's gang, riding in the carriage, left the inn and soon stopped at the village entrance.

"Stop!"

They were halted by a guard stationed at the village's wooden palisade.

Herrington Village wasn't a large village, but it did have a sturdy palisade, and the village militia took turns standing guard. Thanks to this, the village, situated in the forest, had managed to survive until now. Without it, they would have long been devastated by monster attacks.

Jack had anticipated that the guard might try to stop them. He halted the carriage and greeted the guard calmly.

"Uncle Nelson, you're working hard."

"What's this, Jack? Where are you heading at this hour, taking the village's communal carriage?"

"An errand for the village chief. He asked me to fetch something from the neighboring village."

"Really?"

Nelson, the guard, looked skeptical.

Even so, it seemed odd to send someone on an errand at such a late hour, especially someone like Jack, known as the village's biggest loafer. And yet, Jack had agreed to it?

But after a moment of thought, Nelson realized it might not be so strange. Today was a festival day in the village. If something seemed

different from usual, it could still make sense. Besides, the palisade was mainly to defend against outside threats, not internal ones.

“Alright, be careful on your way.”

Nelson opened the palisade gate. Jack nodded his head and drove the carriage through.

Nelson might get scolded by the village chief later for this, but Jack didn't care.

Once they entered the forest, Jack began to drive the carriage faster.

Although they had escaped the immediate danger, it was too early to feel relieved. The moment Kanna, who was locked in the kitchen storeroom, managed to escape, the villagers would come chasing after them.

They had to put as much distance between themselves and the village as possible before that happened.

“D-do you think we'll be alright...?”

Tom mumbled, crouching his large body. He was still holding Ariel carefully in his arms, worried that the bumpy ride might hurt her.

“She saved Daisy's life... Selling her as a slave is too...”

“Shut up, Tom.”

Susan glared at Tom.

“It's too late to say that kind of thing now.”

Susan wasn't worried about Ariel at all. She was only imagining herself becoming a lady with the money from selling Ariel, surrounded by servants, and dreaming of a romance with a handsome nobleman.

They had been away from the village for quite some time. It was when the anxious Tom began to doze off that the carriage suddenly screeched to a stop.

Tom slowly opened his eyes, and Susan, who seemed to have also been dozing, groggily lifted her head.

“Jack, what’s going on...?”

Susan asked toward the outside of the carriage. They were deep in the forest by now.

“Nothing much. Tom, hand me my sword over there.”

Jack said as he got down from the driver’s seat. The mention of a sword made Tom’s face turn pale.

“Wh-why the sword...?”

“Just hurry up and give it to me.”

Susan was the one who moved at his words. She grabbed a crude iron sword lying in a corner of the carriage and handed it to Jack.

“What is it?”

Only then did Susan look ahead of the carriage. A figure was blocking their way.

“A goblin.”

Jack replied casually. At that moment, the clouds cleared, and the moonlight brightened, revealing the figure blocking the carriage.

Green skin and an ugly appearance.

It was a goblin.

“M-monster...!”

Tom gasped, but Susan, like Jack, remained calm.

A single goblin was nothing to be worried about. Goblins were among the weakest of monsters. Even Susan could probably club it to death if she put her mind to it.

“Kerrek.”

The goblin made an unpleasant sound and began to approach them.

Jack, with the iron sword slung over his shoulder, walked toward the goblin without hesitation.

He showed no tension. He planned to smash the goblin's head with the sword as soon as he got close.

“Kerrek, kerrek.”

The goblin made a noise again. At first, he hadn't noticed, but listening carefully, it sounded like laughter.

Jack's face twisted.

“This little punk, laughing at me?”

Jack, enraged, swung his iron sword down.

At that moment, he noticed a shadow moving quickly to the side.

“What!”

Jack flinched and tensed his body. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his thigh.

“Ugh!”

Another goblin had approached from the side.

While Jack was focused on the goblin in front, another one had sneaked up from the side and stabbed Jack in the thigh with a dagger.

Looking at his bleeding thigh, Jack ground his teeth. He hadn't expected to be wounded by mere goblins.

“Kerrek kerrek.”

The two goblins laughed at Jack.

“You damn little bastards!”

Jack's eyes were filled with rage.

Even with one more goblin, it didn't change much. After all, a goblin was a small monster, barely coming up to Jack's waist.

He just had to take care of both.

Jack charged at the goblins, swinging his iron sword.

With a crunching sound, the head of one goblin caved in.

"Haha, foolish thing, trying to mess with me."

The goblin, whose head was smashed, twitched and fell.

The other goblin just stared blankly with a stupid expression.

Jack raised his iron sword again. At that moment, he felt a chill run down his spine.

"What... what is this...?"

Countless red lights appeared around them.

There were easily more than dozens.

They were all goblin eyes. Not one or two.

There were dozens of goblins.

Jack should never have stopped the carriage. He had been careless, thinking there was only one goblin blocking the way.

The moment he stopped the carriage, he was destined to be surrounded by dozens of goblins.

"Kerrek!"

Dozens of goblins rushed at Jack. Jack couldn't even swing his iron sword before he was knocked down and overwhelmed by the goblins.

"Argh!"

Goblins stabbed him mercilessly with daggers and clawed and bit him with bare hands.

Jack's body quickly became tattered. In his fading vision, he saw goblins swarming toward the carriage.

Tom, Susan, the elf, and the fairy wouldn't be safe either.

"Ugh, my head..."

Lu woke up with a hangover. He must have drunk the fruit wine to the limit and lost consciousness.

This often happened to fairies who loved alcohol.

Lu flapped his wings, creating some healing powder, and applied it to his body.

The fairy's healing powder worked on themselves as well, so the hangover quickly disappeared.

"Phew, I feel better now."

Lu sat down on the ground and looked around.

'But where am I?'

The floor and walls were all glass. He seemed to be trapped in a glass jar.

Lu didn't know if he had entered the glass jar himself or if someone else had put him in there.

He pressed close against the glass to look outside, but he couldn't see anything. It was all darkness.

What Lu didn't know was that when the goblins attacked Jack's gang, Susan had accidentally dropped the glass jar in which Lu was confined.

The goblins had taken Jack's gang and Ariel, but they hadn't noticed Lu, who was trapped in the glass jar.

They had no reason to care about a glass jar lying on the ground.

Thus, Lu was left behind.

Lu decided to escape from the glass jar first. Unless it was a magical cage, escaping wouldn't be difficult.

He sprinkled flight powder to lift the glass jar high, then dropped it to break it.

Crash!

With this method, Rue escaped from the glass jar. The stuffy air cleared, and his vision was restored.

“Hmm...”

Lu wasn't in Herrington Village. He was deep in the forest.

How had things come to this?

Perhaps the broken carriage wreckage and the scattered bloodstains and footprints on the ground could provide some clues.

Lu flew around, carefully observing the surroundings.

It seemed a battle had taken place here. There were no bodies, but the scattered blood suggested that someone had been seriously injured.

The footprints on the ground belonged to both humans and monsters.

There were far more monster footprints than human ones.

It was reasonable to assume that a large number of monsters had attacked the humans.

The monsters were surely goblins. The footprints were small. In the forest, only goblins would leave such small footprints.

“Hmmm...”

Lu's expression darkened. Normally, Lu was quite a lively fairy, but

he could think logically when necessary.

And from his perspective, the situation was quite serious.

Goblins were not usually very threatening monsters.

They were physically weak and had no special abilities.

However, the story changed when they formed a group.

When a pack of goblins attacked fiercely and relentlessly, even a troll would eventually fall.

They won by quantity, not quality.

But it was rare for goblins, who were both stupid and nasty, to form a pack.

Usually, they roamed alone or in groups of two or three at most. With two or three, they could only hunt weak animals.

If they attacked humans, they'd usually be beaten up and chased away.

But judging by the footprints, there were dozens of goblins that had attacked the humans.

They had formed a proper group, almost like an army.

There could only be one reason for this.

A Goblin King had appeared.

Chapter 8 : Kidnapping (3)

If a Goblin King had appeared in this forest, it made sense that the goblins would form a group and attack humans. In such a case, it could be considered dangerous.

A group of goblins under the command and with the structure provided by a Goblin King was certainly not something to be taken lightly.

While the fairy village, a natural fortress, would be safe, a human village could be entirely destroyed.

Of course, this was not a matter of concern for Lu.

He didn't particularly care what happened to a human village. What intrigued Lu was why he had been trapped in a glass jar in such a place.

And most importantly,

“Where is the lady?”

He was concerned about Ariel's whereabouts.

However, it didn't seem like a problem he could solve by thinking about it. In the end, there was no choice but to take action.

Lu decided to follow the goblins' tracks for now. He had no interest in the humans who had been attacked, but Ariel might have been taken by the group of goblins.

Although it didn't seem likely that Ariel would be caught by mere goblins... there was always a chance.

Ariel was still a young elf. It wouldn't be strange if she fell into some kind of trap. And if she did, no matter how strong Ariel was, it could

be dangerous.

Worried about Ariel, Lu quickly flew off.

“Please wait for me, lady! Lu is coming!”

He flew in the direction where the goblin tracks led.

“We shouldn’t have left the village...”

Tom muttered pitifully.

The village elders often warned that beyond the palisade lay countless dangers. Jack had dismissed it as nonsense, but in the end, the elders were right.

It was dangerous outside the palisade. That’s why they were in their current predicament.

Jack’s gang, who were attempting to kidnap the elf and the fairy and head to the city, were attacked by goblins in the forest.

If there had been one or two goblins, that would have been one thing, but there were dozens of them.

Jack, who had always boasted that he wouldn’t be fazed even if dozens of insignificant goblins attacked, found himself helpless in the face of such a situation.

He was covered in blood, pinned down by the goblins, and screaming in agony.

Susan tried to run away in tears but was caught, and Tom, holding the sleeping Ariel, sat frozen in the carriage.

The goblins didn’t kill Jack’s gang. Instead, they dragged them to their lair, a cave, and locked them up in a prison.

The goblin prison seemed to be made of sturdy wood, and it was surprisingly well-crafted. It was hard to believe goblins had built something so sophisticated and solid.

“Ugh...”

Tom curled his large body and sobbed. He still held the sleeping Ariel in his arms.

“We’re being punished for kidnapping an elf and a fairy...”

Normally, Susan would have snapped at him to shut up. But now, Susan had no room for that.

Earlier, while trying to flee from the carriage, a goblin had slashed her cheek with a crude dagger.

The goblin’s dagger was blunt and rusted, and the wound was already festering. It would probably leave a terrible scar, even if it healed.

A scar on her face — just the thought was horrifying. There was no way she could seduce a nobleman with a scarred face. Even in this situation, Susan was worried about such things.

In truth, Susan had brought this upon herself. If she had stayed quietly in the carriage like Tom, she wouldn’t have been injured.

Her selfish desire to abandon Jack and Tom to save herself had backfired.

In fact, the goblins hadn’t attacked Tom because he had shown no intention of resisting or escaping.

Jack, lying in a corner of the prison, let out a groan.

After being battered by the goblins, Jack was barely conscious. He was barely alive, having lost a lot of blood, and it seemed unlikely he would survive the night.

“You idiot...”

Susan glared at Jack. She felt like beating him up.

“Why did you stop the carriage? You could have just ignored them and kept going.”

No matter how many goblins there were, they wouldn't have been able to stop a moving carriage.

If Jack had just kept driving the carriage toward the city, they might not be in this situation. Underestimating the goblins, thinking there was only one, had been a mistake. But now, it was meaningless to dwell on it.

"Kerrek."

Two goblins entered the prison.

Tom flinched and hugged Ariel tightly, while Susan pressed herself against the wall. Jack was just lying there.

The two goblins, holding deadly-looking blades, walked menacingly toward Susan.

"D-don't come any closer! Don't come near me!"

Susan screamed, trembling with fear. The goblins tried to pull her out.

"Ahhh! Don't touch me! If you lay a hand on me, our villagers won't let you get away with it! They'll kill all of you!"

Susan struggled as she spoke, but the goblins couldn't understand human language. Even if they could, they wouldn't be scared.

Instead, one of the goblins held a blade to Susan's neck.

"Eek!"

Susan's eyes widened, and she froze. A slight move, and the blade would pierce her throat.

"Kerrek."

Seeing Susan quiet down, the goblin nodded with satisfaction and dragged her away.

Now, only Tom, Jack, and Ariel were left in the prison.

Tom, tears streaming down his face, curled up. No matter how he thought about it, leaving the village had been a mistake.

They shouldn't have tried to kidnap the elf and the fairy. They were being punished for their greed.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

Tom apologized to the sleeping Ariel.

Ariel wouldn't be able to escape from here either. She was an innocent victim of their greed.

While Tom sobbed, a sparkling object flew into the prison with a swish.

"What... who's this chubby human?"

The object that flew in was none other than Lu.

"How dare you lay your dirty hands on my lady! Take them off immediately!"

Using the momentum from his flight, Lu kicked Tom in the face.

Tom wasn't hurt but was shocked. He was too stunned to say anything.

Lu quickly surveyed the prison.

Jack lay in a corner, covered in blood. Tom was sobbing uncontrollably. And Ariel, nestled in Tom's arms, was sleeping peacefully.

Lu spoke to Tom in a serious tone.

"Explain yourself, human."

Tom explained everything to Lu.

How they had planned to kidnap Ariel and Lu, drugged Ariel with a sleeping potion, and were attacked by goblins while fleeing in the carriage.

He confessed everything honestly.

After listening to Tom's explanation, Lu clicked his tongue and shook his head.

"Tsk tsk. This is why I hate humans. You're selfish and greedy down to your bones. We saved Patricia, and you repay us with this?"

"I'm so sorry..."

Tom bowed his head to Lu. His apology was sincere. If he could, he wished to turn back time. If he could do that, he would try to stop Jack's plan.

"Sigh, it can't be helped."

Lu said and then flew over to Jack, who was lying in the corner.

As much as he disliked Jack's gang, Lu wasn't so heartless as to leave a dying human untreated.

Lu sprinkled healing powder on Jack. It didn't seem enough, so he also fed him some.

The healing powder was more effective when consumed than just applied externally. It was almost comparable to a priest's healing magic.

Jack's body began to glow. The bleeding stopped, and his wounds started to heal.

Jack would soon regain consciousness and be able to get up.

"This side is taken care of..."

Lu looked exhausted.

Before treating Jack, Lu had scattered some sleep powder on the goblins guarding the prison when he entered.

Without doing that, he might not have been able to enter the prison. Seeing a glittering fairy, the goblins would have surely made a fuss.

In any case, Lu no longer had the strength to scatter any more powder.

“Now, let’s wake the lady up.”

Lu fluttered over to Ariel. Ariel’s hands and feet were tightly bound with rope.

Seeing that made Lu angry, but he focused on carefully untying the rope.

“She won’t wake up...”

Tom muttered.

“She’s taken a lot of sleeping pills... Susan said she wouldn’t wake up until tomorrow morning.”

“Sleeping pills?”

Lu chuckled.

Ariel had been completely soaked in Patricia’s deadly poison but remained fine.

There was no way mere sleeping pills would affect Ariel.

In reality, Ariel was just sleeping because she was drowsy after eating. The sleeping pills had nothing to do with it.

“Lady, it’s time to wake up.”

Lu gently tapped Ariel’s cheek while speaking softly. Ariel slowly opened her eyes.

“There you go~ Did you sleep well~?”

Ariel blinked a few times with her usual expressionless face, then stretched and sat up.

She looked around and tilted her head in confusion.

She had been eating cream bread and drinking milk at the inn’s

dining room, and now she was in a completely unfamiliar place.

Lu explained the situation to the bewildered Ariel.

He told her exactly what he had heard from Tom.

As Lu's explanation was nearing its end, a sharp scream came from outside the prison.

“Ahhh!”

It was the scream of Susan, who had been dragged away by the goblins.

Chapter 9 : Kidnapping (4)

The cave that the Goblin King had made his lair was incredibly vast.

It was such a large space that it might have once been used as a dragon's lair.

In this enormous space, the Goblin King had installed a magnificent throne.

To lead a group of goblins—or, more ambitiously, a goblin kingdom—one needed to possess a certain level of majesty.

Thus, installing a throne was essential... or so the Goblin King thought. In reality, it was merely a personal indulgence.

There was no real problem leading a group of goblins without something like a throne.

The Goblin King was just another goblin, with red skin and a slightly larger build.

In other words, he was a mutation, born with an extremely low probability among goblins.

Humans also called them hobgoblins.

A hobgoblin is considered a king by the other goblins from birth.

Their red skin, greater strength, and larger size make the goblins instinctively follow them.

Other than these traits, there were no particular qualities necessary to be a Goblin King.

Although he wore a necklace made of animal bones around his neck and held a seemingly impressive staff in his hand, in reality, even

four or five ordinary goblins attacking him simultaneously could defeat a hobgoblin.

That's why he needed a splendid throne. To be recognized as a king, he had to look the part.

A Goblin King who had led a group of goblins for a long time might have established his position, but this Goblin King had not been leading his group for long.

In other words, he was a novice king.

He had managed to form a group of goblins, but he had no idea what to do next.

The sight of dozens of goblins staring at him with bright eyes was quite psychologically burdensome.

So, with a face full of authority, the Goblin King gave his command:

“Go out and plunder other races!”

It was a mindless command without any plan, but the goblins chattered happily with their “Kerrek!” sounds.

Then, they rushed out of the cave.

They might go out, act recklessly toward other races, and get wiped out, but that was beyond the Goblin King's control.

The Goblin King sighed deeply as he sat on his throne.

The weight of the crown was indeed heavy...

While he was striking a solemn pose by himself, the goblins returned after a while.

Amazingly, they had actually plundered another race.

It seemed they had attacked humans.

The spoils included crude iron swords, two horses, two human men, one human woman, and a young elf.

The Goblin King was astonished. This amount of loot was quite impressive.

To have achieved this much without any thought... Perhaps the day when he established a goblin kingdom and ruled the continent was not far off.

This must be because the king was excellent. Thinking this, the Goblin King's shoulders swelled with pride.

He ordered that the three humans and the elf be locked in the prison, and the two horses were given to the goblins to eat.

This was meant as a reward.

“Kerrek!”

The goblins were so excited that they set fires in the cave, which nearly filled the entire cave with smoke and almost suffocated everyone.

The Goblin King executed the goblin who had started the fire and then ordered the other goblins to eat the horses alive.

After all, a goblin should have the cruelty to tear apart live animals. Only then could they conquer the continent.

Of course, the Goblin King did not eat. He was the type to get sick from anything other than cooked meat.

“Kerrek, kerrek.”

The goblins were small, but they were numerous, and soon the two horses were reduced to mere bones.

Seeing the goblins with their mouths covered in blood, patting their full bellies contentedly, made the Goblin King feel uneasy.

Still, he felt a strange sense of satisfaction.

The Goblin King gave another order:

“Bring me the human woman!”

The reward had been given, and now it was time to show some charisma.

The Goblin King planned to execute the human woman in front of all the goblins. Doing so would solidify his position further.

Shortly after, the human woman was brought in by two goblins.

The Goblin King descended from his throne and looked closely at the human woman.

“H-help!”

Seeing the woman’s terrified face staring at him made the Goblin King feel a strange sense of greatness.

The Goblin King lifted the crude iron sword he had obtained as loot.

The sword was heavier than expected, causing his arm to tremble slightly, but he tried not to show it.

If he could just cut off the woman’s head in one stroke, the goblins would surely cheer.

Then the Goblin King would spread his arms wide and shout something like, “Glory to the goblins forever!”

Just imagining it made him feel a thrill, but...

The Goblin King lowered the sword he had lifted.

Come to think of it, did he really need to do it himself...?

A king never does such things directly. A king merely sits on the throne and gives commands.

The Goblin King handed the iron sword to a goblin standing idly beside him. Then he returned to his throne and resumed his imposing expression.

His heart was pounding by now. In fact, the Goblin King had never

actually killed a living creature.

He had ordered the goblins to eat the horses alive and had another goblin executed for setting fire in the cave, but he had never gotten his hands dirty.

So, for some reason, he didn't want to do it. It felt a bit unsettling.

Such tasks were for the underlings to handle.

The Goblin King shouted at the goblin holding the iron sword:

“What are you doing?! Execute the human woman!”

“Kerrek?!”

The goblin holding the sword was startled. Was giving him the sword a command to execute her? That seemed to be the expression on its face.

The king's command was absolute. For some reason, the goblins firmly believed in such things.

The goblin, its arm trembling, lifted the iron sword. It was heavy as well. It felt like his back might break.

Goblins usually wielded light daggers, not such a ridiculously large iron sword.

Anyway, the goblin swung the iron sword at the human woman.

But the sword struck the ground instead of the woman.

Clang!

The sword was so heavy that it missed its target.

Susan wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

It was hard to hold back laughter as she watched a goblin, barely reaching her waist, struggling with a sword as big as itself.

But she didn't laugh because her life was hanging by a thread.

For some reason, the goblins who had dragged her out of the prison were trying to kill her.

It seemed like they intended to eat her. The two horses they had ridden from the village were now nothing but bones.

She would soon end up like that, she thought, and her body trembled. The fear that had briefly subsided seized her mind again.

If only they could understand her, she would beg them to spare her, but whatever she said, the goblins would just keep making their “Kerrek” noises amongst themselves.

“Kerrek!”

The goblin raised the iron sword again.

This time, it looked determined not to miss.

Susan had to choose.

Would she die at the hands of a goblin, or at least put up some resistance?

Goblins were quite cruel.

Remembering how they had mercilessly stabbed Jack with their daggers earlier, she didn’t have the courage to resist.

But if she did nothing, she would die anyway.

In the end, she thought it would be better to fight back, even if she was going to die.

“Take this!”

Susan stood up and rammed her forehead into the goblin’s chin.

“Kerrek!”

The goblin dropped the iron sword and fell backward.

Susan immediately began to run.

She headed toward the cave exit.

When Susan ran, the goblins stared blankly at the Goblin King.

The Goblin King also wore a dazed expression, but he quickly gathered himself and shouted:

“Catch her!”

“Kerrek!”

Only then did the goblins start chasing Susan.

It was a bit late, but it didn’t matter.

The cave currently had several barricades installed, as ordered by the Goblin King.

The Goblin King was a cautious type.

With the barricades in place, they could at least buy some time if another race invaded.

He firmly believed that the barricades would save their lives someday... It turned out they were useful in an unexpected way.

They prevented Susan from escaping.

Of course, if she opened the latch, she could get out, but it would take some time. And that was enough time for the goblins to catch up.

As Susan fumbled with trembling hands to open the latch, she felt a sharp pain in her side and flinched in shock.

“Ouch!”

When she touched her side, she felt warm liquid. It was blood.

A goblin that had chased her had stabbed her with a dagger.

Susan despaired. It didn’t seem like she could escape.

Before she could open the barricade, her body would likely be torn apart like Jack's.

Even if she managed to open the door and escape, how far could she go with her injured body?

She couldn't outrun goblins in the forest. If she could, she wouldn't have been caught when she tried to escape from the carriage in the first place.

The shadow of death loomed over her. Susan found herself agreeing with what Tom had said earlier.

They shouldn't have left the village in the first place.

A glamorous life in the city? A romance with a nobleman? What good were those now?

Living a peaceful life in the village, eating well, and being safe wasn't such a bad life after all.

At least she wouldn't be surrounded by goblins, facing a miserable death like this.

"Kerrek, kerrek."

Dozens of goblins gathered in front of Susan. She clenched her teeth.

Thinking she was really about to die, memories flashed through her mind like a lantern.

The days she had lived in Herrington Village, causing all sorts of trouble, the moments she had tried to boost her self-esteem by flirting with men—all of it was pathetic.

If she were given another chance, she would live differently. She wouldn't have foolish dreams; she would work hard and be sincere...

"Kerrek!"

Seeing the goblins charging at her, Susan closed her eyes tightly.

It was too late to regret now. As she prepared herself for death, a thought crossed her mind.

Boom!

The barrier door behind her exploded.

Susan's body was thrown forward along with the door.

Chapter 10 : Kidnapping (5)

At the sound of Susan's scream coming from outside the prison, Ariel moved immediately.

According to Lu's explanation, it seemed that the kids from Herrington Village had tried to kidnap him, but he didn't want to leave them to die at the hands of goblins.

So, he decided to escape first and then rescue Susan.

The goblins' prison appeared quite sturdy, but for some reason, the door wasn't locked.

The goblins had forgotten to bolt it when they dragged Susan away.

Thanks to this, Ariel simply opened the door and headed toward the direction of the screams.

He saw a few goblins nearby, sleeping soundly.

They had been put to sleep by Lu's sleep powder.

Ignoring them, he continued walking until a large door blocked his path.

Judging from the noise, there was a commotion on the other side of the door.

Unfortunately, this door was not open.

"It seems we'll have to break it, Ma'am," Lu suggested.

Ariel nodded and thrust her fist forward.

Boom!

With an explosive sound, the door was blown away.

As the door disappeared, a large space inside was revealed.

It was quite a big space for a cave.

Dozens of goblins were gathered, and a red goblin was sitting on a chair.

Susan was lying unconscious on the floor.

She had fainted when she was thrown along with the barricade, but Ariel assumed it was the goblins' doing.

Tap, tap, tap! Footsteps could be heard from behind.

It was Jack and Tom, who had followed.

Thanks to Lu's healing powder, Jack had regained consciousness, but he was still not fully recovered.

But he couldn't just lie down and do nothing.

He had heard from Tom that the fairy had healed him and that the elf had gone to rescue Susan.

Even though he had kidnapped the elf and fairy, he wanted to help in some way, given the circumstances.

But...

'What was that just now?'

With another booming sound, the large door was blown away. It was the result of Ariel's punch. Jack was puzzled, but he didn't have time to think. Susan was lying on the floor.

"Susan!"

Jack and Tom ran towards Susan.

There was a festering wound on her face, and blood was oozing from her waist. She was breathing but unconscious.

“Kergh.”

Meanwhile, the goblins stared blankly at their king.

When with the Goblin King, the goblins’ actions are dictated by him.

But even the Goblin King didn’t know what to do in this situation.

He had ordered them to catch the escaping human woman, but suddenly, the barricade had exploded.

And now, a young elf and two human men had barged in without hesitation.

Was this dangerous?

The Goblin King quickly thought. It seemed dangerous.

The barricade had been built with great care, so even a troll ramming into it wouldn’t break it easily.

The fact that it had been blown away with a single blow suggested a powerful being capable of such a feat.

The Goblin King’s gaze turned toward Ariel.

And Ariel was also looking at the Goblin King.

At that moment, the Goblin King felt a chill run down his spine.

Ariel certainly looked young.

Maybe ten years old at most.

But for someone so young, there was no trace of vitality or life in her expression. She seemed... different. Perhaps, she wasn’t as young as she looked.

Or maybe, she wasn’t even an elf in the first place. A dragon? A demon lord? The Goblin King couldn’t be sure. What was certain was that he was in danger and needed to flee immediately.

The Goblin King gave the order.

“Attack the elf!”

The reason for the attack order was to buy time to escape.

Regardless of who the young elf was, there were dozens of goblins here. It would take some time to defeat them all. He just needed to escape in the meantime.

The Goblin King stood up from his throne.

He intended to flee through a secret passage prepared at the back. But at that moment, he felt the cave light up.

“???”

When he turned his head, a blue orb had risen above Ariel’s head.

Whatever it was, it seemed incredibly dangerous. As soon as the Goblin King sensed that, Ariel lightly waved her hand.

Pew!

The blue orb split into dozens of fragments and shot out. And that was the end.

All the goblins present had holes in their heads.

Dozens of goblins collapsed, and among them, of course, was the Goblin King.

Somehow, today had been a lucky day.

The Goblin King, with a hole in his forehead, died with that thought as his last.

Kanna, who had been locked in the inn’s kitchen storeroom, was found only several hours later.

Kanna’s parents, who had returned to the inn after the village festival, discovered her locked in the kitchen storeroom.

Kanna urgently explained to her parents that it seemed like Jack’s gang was up to something.

Kanna's parents informed the village chief, and soon it was revealed that the village's shared carriage was missing and that Nelson had opened the stockade to let Jack's gang pass through.

Moreover, the sleeping pills that Tom's mother used were entirely gone, and Jack had tried to deliver the cream bread that Kanna intended to give to Ariel. Putting all this together...

It seemed that Jack's gang had kidnapped Ariel and Lu and left for the city. Given Jack's usual behavior, it was easy to understand.

The village atmosphere grew dark, as if covered by storm clouds. Even in their drunken state, the villagers gathered at the chief's house to discuss what to do next.

"We cannot let this go. The young elf is the benefactor who saved Daisy's life. Repaying kindness with malice is a sin deserving of divine punishment!"

"Besides, the carriage Jack took is village property. This is outright theft. He must be caught."

"Let's catch him and give him a good scolding so he can't do this again."

"Or better yet, let's banish him from the village altogether. Tom might be a bit better, but Jack and Susan haven't been much help to the village anyway."

"Right, they've only been busy causing trouble."

The villagers' opinions were unanimous.

They would capture Jack's gang, rescue the elf, and then either scold or banish them from the village.

Even the parents of Jack's gang agreed.

No matter how they were their children, there were limits to what could be tolerated.

This incident was so serious that even the parents could not protect

them.

The village chief was of the same opinion.

“Then, at dawn, we’ll pursue them immediately.”

It was the dead of night. Going outside the stockade at this time was dangerous.

They could get lost in the forest or encounter monsters.

In such a case, there could be casualties.

Although their hearts were urgent, the chief decided to wait patiently until the morning sun rose. No one objected.

The villagers knew how dangerous the forest was at night.

Fortunately, they had a rough idea of where Jack’s gang was headed.

“They must be heading to the city. They always boasted about wanting to live glamorously in the city.”

After defeating the goblins and the Goblin King, Ariel put all the bodies into her inventory.

Goblin corpses probably wouldn’t fetch much money, unlike troll corpses, but it didn’t matter.

Since there was plenty of space, she could stuff as much as she wanted.

“The Goblin King might fetch a fair price. He’s quite rare,” Lu remarked, and Ariel nodded.

The Goblin King was indeed different from the other goblins.

His skin was red, and he was slightly larger.

Ariel didn’t know why that made him a king, but he was certainly unusual. Someone might want to buy him.

After roughly tidying up, Ariel approached Jack’s group.

Susan was still unconscious, but thanks to Lu's exhaustive effort to sprinkle healing powder, the wounds on her face and waist were healing.

Her facial wounds would scar, but Lu couldn't do anything about that.

For now, ensuring the wounds healed well without festering was the priority.

Jack and Tom hung their heads in shame.

If it weren't for Ariel and Lu, they would have certainly been killed by the goblins.

It was humiliating to owe their lives to someone they had kidnapped.

At least in the past, Jack might have been more brazen. But this incident had completely broken his spirit.

He had come face to face with reality.

He was nothing, and the world outside the village stockade was dangerous.

Above all, Ariel had shown formidable strength.

Ariel had blown away a massive door with a single punch and wiped out dozens of goblins with one spell.

How ridiculous it was for someone like him to think he could kidnap someone like her.

Even without the goblin attack, Jack would not have succeeded in his plan.

As soon as they reached the city and Ariel woke up, it would have been over for him. That was how unbeatable Ariel was.

Jack fell to his knees.

"I'm sorry. I did something I shouldn't have. I have no excuse..."

Ariel and Lu were benefactors of the village.

They had saved the village chief's daughter, Daisy. And yet, Jack had kidnapped them.

Even Jack knew how disgraceful his actions were.

He had simply turned a blind eye, driven by greed.

Then, they were attacked by goblins and nearly died, but once again, they were saved by those they had wronged.

Without Lu's healing powder, Jack and Susan wouldn't have survived, and without Ariel dealing with the goblins, Tom would have died too.

So, Jack couldn't bring himself to look up. All he could do was sincerely apologize.

"I... I'm sorry too..."

Tom knelt beside Jack. With the two of them kneeling, Ariel felt a bit uncomfortable.

She didn't even know what Jack and Tom had done wrong.

She had been kidnapped, but from Ariel's perspective, she had simply woken up in a goblin prison.

She had escaped the prison, defeated the goblins, and stored their bodies in her inventory.

Sure, they had done something wrong, but it didn't really resonate with Ariel. Perhaps it was because she hadn't suffered any real harm.

"Hmm."

Lu, standing next to her, cleared his throat and asked Ariel, "Sister, what should we do?"

Lu, too, felt slightly burdened, like Ariel. Although he didn't like the human race and found these guys annoying, they seemed to be

genuinely repentant.

If Ariel and he had been harmed, that would be another matter, but perhaps it would look better to act generously and forgive them.

“Should we forgive them?”

Ariel nodded as if she had been waiting for that suggestion.

Jack and Tom quickly looked up.

Ariel felt relieved, and so did Lu. This situation had been a bit awkward for both of them.

“Th-Thank you...!”

Jack and Tom, unaware of Ariel and Lu’s thoughts, were deeply moved and began to cry tears of gratitude.

Ariel and Lu headed back to Herrington Village.

Behind them, Jack’s gang followed at a slight distance.

Ariel and Lu were fine, but Jack’s gang was exhausted. They had walked all night the distance they had traveled by carriage.

Their dream of selling the elf and fairy into slavery and living glamorously in the city had been crushed in just one day. Yet, Jack’s face looked somewhat bright.

He seemed relieved. Susan and Tom had similar expressions.

The morning sun was rising.

A gentle breeze was blowing, and the fresh scent of grass filled the air. Compared to the nightmare they had experienced the previous night, everything now seemed beautiful.

He was glad he had survived.

Thinking this, Jack thanked Ariel once more in his heart. From now on, he would have to stay alert.

They had lost the village's shared carriage and two horses, so they would surely be scolded severely, but if they sincerely reflected on their actions and worked hard, they could repay their debts.

They would have to apologize to Kanna when they returned to the village.

While Jack was lost in thought, the stockade of Herrington Village came into view.

Chapter 11 : Kidnapping (6)

As the morning sun rose, the people of Herrington Village were ready to set out to chase after Jack's gang.

But they no longer needed to.

Just as they were about to leave the stockade, they saw Ariel, Lu, and Jack's gang walking toward them from a distance.

While Ariel and Lu seemed fine, Jack's gang looked utterly exhausted.

Their faces and clothes were covered in blood.

They seemed to have gone through quite an ordeal during the night, but that didn't matter.

Seeing Jack's gang, the village chief felt his anger surge up to the top of his head.

He had always let their mischief slide with a laugh, but now they had caused such a huge incident?

He wanted to beat them right then and there, but first, he needed to check on Ariel and Lu.

"Are you alright, Elf and Fairy? I've heard what happened. Those damned fools kidnapped you...."

"They did," Lu, who was sitting on Ariel's shoulder, replied bluntly.

"But it didn't matter in the end."

"I apologize. This happened because I failed as the village chief. I'm truly ashamed."

“No need for apologies. Our lady here has generously decided to forgive them. Right now, we just want to go back to the inn and rest. We haven’t had proper rest since yesterday.”

“I understand. Let me take you to the inn right away.”

The village chief guided Ariel and Lu to the inn, while the villagers dragged Jack’s gang away to somewhere else.

“Ariel! Lu!”

As they entered the inn, Kanna hurriedly approached them.

“Are you both okay?”

Kanna hadn’t slept a wink, worried that something terrible might have happened to Ariel and Lu.

“I didn’t think you’d be back so soon. What happened to Jack?”

“You should ask the villagers about that. Right now, our lady needs to rest. Get us some cream bread and milk. And prepare a warm bath and some fruit wine. Actually, forget the wine.”

Lu was reflecting.

He realized that it was because he drank the fruit wine and got drunk last night that Ariel ended up getting kidnapped.

Luckily, things had ended without further trouble, but he decided to stay alert and protect Ariel from now on.

And that meant giving up alcohol.

“No fruit wine?”

But when Kanna asked again, Lu’s resolve started to waver. He made a pained expression.

“W-Well... To protect our lady... I can’t drink...”

Then Ariel spoke.

“You can drink.”

“!”

Lu’s eyes widened.

“R-Really? I can drink, my lady?!”

“Yes.”

“But... I mean, I couldn’t protect you yesterday because of my drinking... Doesn’t that make me unworthy to stay by your side...?”

“It’s fine. Drink.”

“My lady....”

Lu looked at Ariel with teary eyes but soon smiled brightly and turned toward Kanna.

“Kanna, you heard that, right? Since our lady has kindly allowed it, bring lots of fruit wine! Quick, quick!”

Jack’s gang, who had been dragged away by the villagers, was put in prison.

This time, it wasn’t a prison made by goblins but one made by the villagers.

The village chief first interrogated Jack about what had happened.

While it was a relief that they had returned on their own before the villagers had to go after them, the exact details of what had occurred were still unclear.

Jack confessed everything that had happened.

He was no longer his usual sly or defiant self.

To the village chief, it seemed like his attitude had changed overnight.

The part where Jack’s gang had kidnapped Ariel with sleeping pills

and stolen the village's shared carriage to head for the city was as expected.

But what happened afterward was a truly astonishing story.

Especially the part where Ariel wiped out a group of goblins with a single spell—it was hard to believe, even after hearing it.

“I thought she was unusual from the moment she saved Patricia... but I had no idea she was this powerful....”

She must be a very powerful mage.

The village chief let out a sigh of relief. It had nearly been a disaster. If Ariel had wanted revenge, Harrington Village would have been wiped out in an instant.

“Foolish brats.”

The village chief glared at Jack's gang. Because of them, the village had almost been destroyed, and his anger surged again.

Although Ariel and Lu had forgiven them, that was their decision; from the village's perspective, they could not be forgiven.

Because of them, they also had to buy a new shared carriage and horses, which was quite a significant loss.

“You will be slaves of our village from now on. From sunrise to sunset, you will do nothing but work for the next three years. That's your punishment. If you have any complaints, speak now.”

Jack's gang did not open their mouths. Their expressions were not bright, but they didn't seem to have any complaints either.

There was even a solemn atmosphere, as if they had accepted their fate.

The village chief thought that was a relief.

If they had tried to make excuses or avoid taking responsibility for their actions, he had planned to beat them to the brink of death and

then banish them from the village.

And banishment from the village meant certain death.

“And you will live with a constant sense of remorse toward the Elf and the Fairy for the rest of your lives. Not only did they forgive your shameless crime, but they also saved your worthless lives. Understood?”

Jack’s gang nodded silently.

The village chief let out a deep sigh. With this, the matter of Jack’s gang had been settled.

The labor they would perform in the future would be extremely tough and greatly benefit the village.

However, he still didn’t know how to properly apologize to Ariel and Lu.

He suspected they would refuse any compensation if he offered it, claiming they wanted nothing.

But it didn’t feel right to do nothing, given the enormous favor they had done for them. If they didn’t want money, he wished to express his gratitude in some other way.

‘I’ll need to talk to Kanna....’

It was Kanna who had brought Ariel and Lu to the village. She was also the only one who had talked with them.

The village chief headed back to the inn.

Jingle.

When the village chief arrived at the inn, it was bustling with activity.

The villagers were gathered in a circle in the dining room, and in the middle, Lu was drunkenly flying around, boasting about Ariel’s battles.

He described how Ariel had defeated a troll, saved Patricia while slaying all sorts of monsters, even fended off a wyvern that tried to capture him, and most recently, defeated the Goblin King and his hordes—all in a far more exaggerated manner than reality.

Fairies are natural storytellers.

Although all of Ariel's battles ended in just a second, with Lu's narrative and presentation, the battles seemed grander and more spectacular than they actually were.

The villagers listened intently, exclaiming, "Ooh!" and "Wow!" in awe at Lu's tale.

"So, how old is Lady Ariel? She looks even younger than Kanna," a young man asked with sparkling eyes, to which Lu frowned deeply.

"Geez, it's rude to ask a lady her age. Don't you know that?"

"Oh, right. I'm sorry, my bad."

In truth, Lu didn't know Ariel's exact age, either. Even though he called her "sister," he actually thought Ariel was younger than him.

In any case, Ariel was nowhere to be seen. As the village chief looked around, Kanna came out from the kitchen.

"Are you looking for someone, chief?"

"Oh, Kanna. Where is the Elf?"

"Ariel went to take a bath."

"Hmm, can we have a quick chat?"

"With me?"

"Yes."

"Sure."

The village chief took Kanna outside the inn. The inn was too noisy with Lu and the villagers chatting away to have a proper

conversation.

Once outside, the village chief explained his intention.

He wanted to offer some form of compensation to Ariel and Lu, but he didn't know what would be appropriate.

"Hmm... It seems that Ariel and Lu aren't very interested in money."

"I thought so too. I tried to ask yesterday, but the Fairy scolded me. Talking about money might offend their pure hearts. But doing nothing doesn't sit well with me either. After all, they've done us a huge favor. So I'd like to give them something that won't be too burdensome... What do you think they might like?"

"Hmm..."

Kanna tilted her head and thought for a moment, then clapped her hands.

"Oh, I know! Lu loves fruit wine, and Ariel loves cream bread. I think they'd be really happy if you gave them that!"

"Fruit wine and cream bread...?"

"Yes."

At that moment, the village chief felt a sudden clarity.

Now that he thought about it, when he asked Ariel what she wanted in the square, she had answered "cream bread." Yes, she definitely did.

After that, Ariel had gone to the inn to eat cream bread. So, that was indeed what she wanted.

The village chief ran his hands over his face. Ariel had already said what she wanted, but he hadn't listened properly.

"Haha, well..."

The village chief chuckled in disbelief and patted Kanna's head. At

least he had figured it out now. If he had realized it any later, Ariel and Lu might have left the village, and he would have regretted it greatly.

“Prepare plenty of cream bread and fruit wine for them. As much as they want, free of charge. After they leave, I will settle the bill.”

“Got it.”

“Good. Now go back in. Since you’re the one closest to them, take good care of them.”

“Sure.”

Watching Kanna head back into the inn, the village chief smiled and started toward his house. Now that he knew what Ariel and Lu wanted, he felt much lighter.

Back at the inn, Kanna paced nervously in front of the bathhouse.

Ariel had gone in to wash up after devouring her cream bread and milk, and she still hadn’t come out.

By now, the bathwater would have turned cold. No matter how much one wanted to get clean, this was taking too long.

Could something have happened?

She was worried enough to feel a bit uneasy.

Kanna thought about telling Lu, but Lu had already drunk himself to sleep on the table.

Muttering to herself about what he could possibly protect in that state, Kanna knocked on the bathhouse door.

Knock, knock.

“Ariel...?”

There was no response. She had no other choice.

This wasn’t out of curiosity; she was genuinely concerned, so she had

no choice but to open the door.

Creak.

Kanna carefully opened the door to the bathhouse and saw Ariel sitting in the tub.

Ariel had her head lowered, her eyes closed. Kanna flinched and stepped closer.

“Ari...el?”

Just as she was about to shake Ariel’s shoulder, she heard soft, steady breathing.

Ariel was asleep.

Chapter 12 : Silver Wolf (1)

Kanna stared in fascination at the sleeping face of Ariel.

As expected of an elf, she was truly beautiful. Just looking at her made Kanna feel happy.

Especially when she was asleep, she looked even prettier than when awake.

When awake, her expression was so emotionless that it was a bit difficult to approach her, but her sleeping face was adorable, like an angel.

“Hmmm...”

Kanna hesitated, fidgeting with her fingers. Maybe, just maybe, she could touch Ariel’s cheek right now?

‘No... I can’t do it without permission. It might seem rude....’

But what if, just a little bit, while she was still asleep? Ariel wouldn’t even know, right?

Someone once told Kanna something like this:

“If you don’t get caught, it never happened.”

The person who said that was Jack, the village’s biggest troublemaker and the mastermind behind Ariel’s kidnapping incident, but that didn’t matter to Kanna right now.

‘As long as I don’t get caught...’

Finally, Kanna stretched out her finger and poked Ariel’s cheek.

Poke.

Ariel's cheek was unbelievably soft, like a squishy mochi.

‘Ahh... This is it...’

Kanna trembled with ecstasy, and at that moment, Ariel opened her eyes.

“Ah!”

Kanna almost jumped out of her skin in surprise. Ariel stared at her blankly.

“N-no, it's not what it looks like... The bathwater was getting cold... I was worried you might catch a cold if you slept here...”

While Kanna was making excuses, Ariel rose from the bath.

She immediately tried to leave the bathroom, her steps a bit clumsy.

“Ah, Ariel!”

Kanna quickly grabbed Ariel's shoulder.

She couldn't let her leave the bathroom like this.

There were people outside, and Ariel was currently not wearing a stitch of clothing.

“You should get dressed first.”

Kanna began to dry Ariel's body with a towel.

This was a huge reward for Kanna.

Indeed, boldly entering the bath had been the best decision of her life.

Ariel quietly let Kanna's hands dry her.

Her demeanor had suddenly become docile.

Kanna didn't know, but Ariel was currently feeling embarrassed.

Even if she was embodying a game character, showing her naked body to Kanna was a little humiliating.

“Alright, lift your arms.”

Kanna helped Ariel put on some clothes.

Since the adventurous outfit Ariel usually wore had been washed, she dressed her in her own pajamas.

“Hmm, as expected, it’s a bit big.”

Kanna’s pajamas were too large for Ariel.

The sleeves hung down, hiding her hands, and the shoulder area slightly slipped down.

‘Perfect.’

Kanna nodded in satisfaction.

In truth, Kanna had carefully chosen the pajamas for Ariel, fully anticipating this fit.

And now, Ariel looked absolutely adorable, just as Kanna had imagined.

“Hehe.”

Seeing Kanna chuckling mischievously, Ariel felt a sudden chill for some reason.

Ariel, who had slept all day in the inn room, finally woke up the next morning.

Feeling something holding her back, she looked to the side and found Kanna hugging her tightly.

Ariel, unaware, was sleeping, but last night, Lu had drunk heavily with the villagers until late, and eventually collapsed.

Kanna had to bring her back to the room.

And when Kanna brought Lu back to the room, she found Ariel sleeping in her pajamas...

Unable to resist the temptation, Kanna hugged Ariel tightly and fell asleep beside her.

Ariel pushed Kanna aside and got up from the bed.

The sun was rising outside the window.

She had wondered before falling asleep if she might return to reality upon waking up, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

Still, it was the same game world.

Not that it really mattered.

There was no need to overthink it.

As long as she could continue her adventure, that was enough.

Ariel took off Kanna's pajamas and put on her own clothes hanging on the wall.

Thanks to Kanna's careful washing yesterday, her clothes smelled nice.

She neatly folded the borrowed pajamas.

"Mmm..."

At that moment, Kanna woke up.

Rubbing her eyes, Kanna looked around, as if she didn't understand why she was here.

Then, suddenly, with a look of realization, she glanced at Ariel.

"Oh, Ariel. I'm sorry, I fell asleep here after bringing Lu back. I was so tired. Were you uncomfortable?"

Pretending her deliberate actions were accidental, Kanna cautiously watched Ariel's reaction.

Usually, Kanna never lied, but she was just an ordinary person when it came to her desires.

Fortunately, Ariel didn't seem to care much.

Ariel handed the pajamas back to Kanna.

Kanna took the pajamas and asked.

“Are you leaving now?”

“Yes.”

“I see... Well, you said you were on an adventure.”

Kanna felt a pang of regret, but she couldn't hold Ariel back.

There was no way Ariel would stay in Herrington Village, and she had mentioned she would leave after staying just one night.

“Oh, wait, I have something for you before you go. Just a moment; I'll get it ready.”

Leaving those words, Kanna dashed out of the room.

Ariel left the room after Lu woke up.

Upon waking, Lu, suffering from a hangover, groaned and moved sluggishly, then created some healing powder, applied it to herself, and swallowed a handful.

She quickly recovered and shouted, “Let's go, sister!” before climbing onto Ariel's shoulder.

When Ariel stepped out of the room, Kanna was waiting at the inn's counter.

“Here, take this.”

Kanna handed over a large paper bag.

“It's a gift.”

Ariel opened the paper bag.

Inside, it was filled with cream buns Ariel liked and fruit wine that Lu liked.

“It’s a token of the villagers’ appreciation. Please accept it.”

She had no intention of refusing.

“Hooray!”

Lu cheered at the sight of the fruit wine, and Ariel put the entire paper bag into her inventory.

Once inside the inventory, the cream buns and fruit wine would maintain their current state.

She could take them out and eat whenever she wanted during her adventures.

A rare smile appeared on Ariel’s face.

It was a faint smile, hard to notice unless you looked closely, but Kanna could see it.

“Oh, Ariel, do you like it...?”

Kanna’s eyes welled up with tears, feeling an unexpected surge of emotion.

Ariel, who had been indifferent all this time, now seemed pleased, and Kanna was so moved that she struggled to hold back her tears.

Ariel didn’t know why Kanna was crying, but it somehow bothered her.

Thinking about what she could give in return, she took out a necklace from her inventory and put it around Kanna’s neck.

A necklace made of animal bones.

It was something she had taken from the Goblin King.

Kanna flinched when she saw the necklace.

A necklace made of animal bones—it seemed eerie and scary.

But since it was from Ariel, she had to keep her expression neutral.

Kanna forced a smile.

“Th-this is for me?”

“Yes.”

“Th-thank you...”

Forcing a smile caused Kanna’s lips to tremble, but Ariel didn’t notice that part.

Ariel turned away and walked toward the village gate without stopping.

The guard opened the gate, and only then did Ariel look back.

The villagers had gathered to see Ariel and Lu off.

Jack’s gang was nowhere in sight, but the village chief, his daughter Daisy, and Kanna were all watching Ariel with expressions of regret.

There was an awkward silence, and Kanna shouted tearfully.

“Ariel...! Come visit us again! Promise, okay?!”

This prompted the villagers to start speaking one by one.

“Yes, Lady Ariel! You’re always welcome to visit! You’re our village’s benefactor!”

“Lu! Let’s have a grand drink next time!”

“Please take care of yourselves!”

Moved by the villagers’ enthusiastic response, Lu waved her hand, tears streaming down her face.

“Yes, goodbye...! I will definitely come again!”

Ariel also waved a small hand at the villagers, then turned around and continued walking.

Thus, Ariel’s adventure began anew.

After leaving Herrington Village, Ariel set her destination for a city.

She planned to watch how people lived there and sell monster corpses.

Of course, there was no need to rush, so her pace was leisurely.

She took her time, enjoying the scenery as she walked, taking out cream buns from her inventory whenever she was hungry, simply savoring a relaxing time.

“Mmm...”

Lu, who had been drunk on fruit wine since midday and sprawled on a rock, mumbled.

“Sis... I smell something...”

Ariel was sitting by the lakeside, dipping her feet in the water, gazing up at the sky.

She tilted her head at Lu’s words.

Ariel couldn’t tell what kind of smell Lu was talking about.

“Hmm, I’m sure of it...”

Lu staggered to her feet, taking a handful of healing powder and stuffing it into her mouth.

When Ariel walked out of the lake, Lu, who had come to her senses, narrowed her eyes and stared beyond the forest.

“There’s a strong smell of blood nearby, sister. Should we check it out?”

At Lu's question, Ariel nodded.

If there was a strong smell of blood, there was a high possibility a battle had occurred nearby.

And nothing was more exciting to watch than a fight.

Ariel and Lu climbed a tree, concealing their presence as they approached the source of the blood scent.

The closer they got, the more Ariel could smell the blood too.

She could also hear sounds like beasts howling, "Kyaaa!" or "Kyaaaao!"

Soon, Ariel and Lu reached the scene of the fight.

Hiding among the high branches, they saw a battle was indeed taking place.

It was a fight between orcs with green skin and a wolf with silver fur.

There were dozens of orcs, but the silver wolf was alone.

"Ohh."

Lu, sitting on Ariel's shoulder, remarked.

"That silver wolf is quite an extraordinary creature."

Ariel didn't know much, but she somehow felt she could agree that the silver wolf was extraordinary.

Its silver fur had a mysterious aura, and it was much larger than a normal wolf.

"But it looks like it's in trouble...."

Lu's voice grew slightly somber.

There were other silver wolf corpses around the lone silver wolf.

There were seven in total, and judging by their small size, they

seemed to be cubs.

The silver wolf cubs were all dead, covered in blood.

“Looks like the orc pack killed the silver wolf cubs, and now the mother wolf is fighting a desperate battle.”

Ariel silently watched the silver wolf fighting the orcs.

Indeed, as Lu said, the silver wolf was fighting desperately.

It paid no attention to its own injuries, recklessly lunging at the orc pack.

Wolves are usually calm animals, but having lost its cubs, it couldn't possibly maintain its composure.

The outcome of the battle was obvious.

Although a few orcs lay on the ground with their throats torn out by the silver wolf, there were still far more orcs left to fight.

Eventually, the silver wolf was struck by an orc's axe and collapsed.

The orc pack quickly pounced to prevent the silver wolf from getting up, trampling and kicking it repeatedly.

The silver wolf, whimpering in pain, lay on the ground, panting heavily, seemingly too exhausted to stand.

Yet, its eyes still burned with fury as it glared at the orcs.

One orc, laughing harshly, stepped on the silver wolf's neck and raised his axe high.

“It's over.”

Lu muttered.

The fight was over. The moment the orc brought down the axe, the silver wolf would join its cubs in the afterlife.

And the silver wolf's bodies would all become the orcs' food.

It was bitter, but it was inevitable.

A natural occurrence.

Just as the orc was about to bring the axe down.

Ariel murmured softly.

“Shield.”

Chapter 13 : Silver Wolf (2)

When Ariel cast the defensive skill ‘Shield,’ a blue barrier formed around the silver wolf.

The orc’s axe struck the blue barrier.

With a loud *clang*, the orc’s axe flew far away.

“Screech...?”

The orc stepped back, clutching its throbbing wrist, a puzzled expression on its face.

The axe, which had been swung with the intention of cutting the silver wolf’s throat in a single blow, was suddenly blocked by a blue barrier—it was a phenomenon it could not understand.

“Screech! Screech!”

The other orcs, excited, attacked the silver wolf.

They swung their axes wildly to break through the blue barrier surrounding the silver wolf.

But the blue barrier didn’t even get a scratch.

It was a natural result.

There was no way the orcs could break through the defensive skill cast by Ariel.

“Screech, screech!”

The orcs stomped their feet in frustration and tore at their hair in anger.

They had gone to great lengths to hunt the silver wolf, only for a blue barrier to appear and interfere!

But they couldn't just give up.

The silver wolf cubs were too small to fill their bellies.

They needed at least the mother's size to have a satisfying meal.

But no matter what they did, the blue barrier didn't budge.

One orc, in frustration, rammed its forehead against the barrier, only to die, bleeding.

Meanwhile, Ariel and Lu were watching the situation from the tree.

"Sis, are you planning to save that silver wolf?"

Lu asked, and Ariel nodded.

She couldn't quite explain why, even to herself.

She just felt sympathy for the silver wolf that had lost its cubs.

"As expected, my sister is so righteous!"

From the orcs' perspective, it wouldn't seem that way at all, but justice often depends on one's point of view.

For now, saving the silver wolf that was dying after losing its cubs was justice.

With a leap, Ariel jumped down from the tree.

As she landed on the ground, she fired magic missiles equal to the number of orcs.

Fwoosh!

The orcs, who were howling in frustration, fell with holes in their foreheads.

Ariel put all the orc corpses into her inventory and approached the

silver wolf.

“Growl, growl...”

The silver wolf growled warily, glaring at Ariel.

It didn't have the strength to stand right now, but if it could, it seemed ready to lunge at Ariel immediately.

Even so, Ariel asked Lu to heal the silver wolf.

“Hmm, I'm scared it might eat me, but...”

To Lu, the silver wolf was also a frightening existence.

Not only monsters but also beasts sometimes hunted fairies.

Lu flew as high as possible and sprinkled healing powder.

The silver wolf's body, touched by Lu's healing powder, began to shine.

Soon, the silver wolf regained its strength and stood up.

The silver wolf didn't even glance at Ariel or Lu; it just trudged toward its dead cubs.

Ariel and Lu could not fathom the feelings of a mother who had lost her cubs.

At least for now, the silver wolf looked very sorrowful.

Judging by its trembling body, it seemed to be crying.

The silver wolf gathered the bodies of its cubs that were scattered around.

Since they had already passed away, Lu's healing powder would be of no use.

“Awoooo!”

The silver wolf howled toward the sky, a mournful and desperate cry.

Ariel, without realizing it, walked over and patted the silver wolf's chin.

The wolf was so large that she had to stand on tiptoe.

The silver wolf flinched, but it did not reject Ariel's touch.

The silver fur looked very mystical from the outside, but it felt soft to the touch, making Ariel feel good.

"Hm, come to think of it, this silver wolf looks like you, sister."

Lu said, flying around the silver wolf.

"The color of its fur, the color of its eyes... Hmm, is this destiny?"

At Lu's words, Ariel took another close look at the silver wolf.

The silver wolf's eyes were blood-red.

Indeed, they were the same color as Ariel's eyes.

After petting the silver wolf's chin for a while, Ariel suddenly sat down and began to dig into the ground.

It was to bury the silver wolf's cubs.

She couldn't just leave the bodies there.

She was digging with her bare hands, without a shovel, but Ariel's strength and agility were limitless.

Thud thud thud!

The speed at which Ariel was digging was so fast that it was almost invisible, and the silver wolf and Lu watched in slight amazement.

This wasn't just any mole... Lu thought, but she kept the thought to herself.

Soon, a large pit was made in the ground.

Ariel carefully laid the bodies of the silver wolf's cubs into the hole.

Her attitude was extremely cautious.

The silver wolf did not stop Ariel; it just watched.

It seemed to understand what Ariel was doing.

After laying all the silver wolf cubs side by side in the hole, Ariel climbed back to the ground.

She quietly looked at the bodies and began covering them with soil.

Unlike when she dug the hole, her movements were slow, as if giving the silver wolf time to say goodbye to its cubs.

“Whimper...”

The silver wolf scratched the ground with its paws as it watched the cubs being buried in the soil.

It seemed so much like a weeping lament that Lu’s eyes filled with tears.

After the pit was completely covered with soil, Ariel leveled the ground and piled stones on top of it.

It was a time-consuming task, but in the end, the grave of the silver wolf cubs looked quite decent.

Ariel dusted off her hands and turned around.

This was all she could do.

The silver wolf watched Ariel’s retreating figure for a long time.

Ariel continued through the forest.

The city was still a long way off, so she had to camp, but she didn’t mind.

For washing, she just threw herself into a lake, and for meals, she took out cream buns from her inventory.

At night, she could sleep safely by setting up a shield around her.

Monsters would approach, seeing Ariel asleep, but after realizing that attacking the shield was useless, they would get tired and give up, retreating.

Sometimes, persistent monsters would sit in front of the shield, waiting for Ariel to come out, but they would easily meet their end with Ariel's magic missiles as soon as she woke up.

Today, too, Ariel woke up feeling refreshed and dispelled the shield.

Maintaining a shield all night would be a challenging task even for most high-ranking mages, but it was effortless for Ariel.

Once she deployed the shield, that was it.

"Huh? What's this, sister?"

When Ariel dispelled the shield, she found a rabbit and a squirrel carcass lying in front of her.

Both had been killed with a bite to the neck, and it was easy to guess what had happened.

"It seems the silver wolf wants to repay its debt."

Lu murmured, looking at the rabbit and squirrel corpses.

It was clear that the silver wolf had left them.

To repay Ariel, it had brought hunting prey.

Of course, Ariel had no intention of eating a rabbit or a squirrel.

If someone cooked them for her, maybe, but preparing and roasting them herself was tedious and bothersome.

Still, she couldn't ignore the gesture, so Ariel put the rabbit and squirrel carcasses in her inventory.

Ariel's inventory was already filled with the bodies of dead monsters and beasts, but the space remained infinite. There was no problem.

Ariel took out a cream bun, bit into it, and continued walking.

“I think this will keep happening for a few days.”

Lu said, perching on Ariel’s shoulder.

“Even now, the silver wolf is following us at a certain distance.”

Ariel smiled slightly at Lu’s words.

It was a good thing that the silver wolf was following them.

Maybe it could even accompany her on her adventures.

The silver wolf’s fur was so soft that it felt pleasant to the touch.

Besides, the silver wolf was big enough for Ariel to ride on.

She hoped it would continue to follow her.

Ariel thought this as she moved through the forest.

She had already secretly decided on a name for the silver wolf, but she didn’t approach it rashly.

If she did, it might become frightened or defensive and run away.

For several days, Ariel woke up in the morning to find a rabbit and squirrel carcass placed in front of her shield.

During that time, the silver wolf never once showed itself to Ariel.

Ariel started to worry that it might repay its debt and leave for good, but then something happened.

While walking through the forest, a distant howl of the silver wolf reached her ears.

“Kyahhhh!”

It was the same sound as when it had fought the orcs before.

Upon hearing the sound, Lu spoke to Ariel.

“Sis, that silver wolf seems to be...”

But before Lu could finish, Ariel had already leapt toward the direction of the sound.

Chapter 14 : Silver Wolf (3)

“Damn it.”

Knight Shane looked at the silver wolf before him with a tense expression.

It was rare for Shane, a knight recognized for his skills in the northern part of the Empire, to be this nervous.

Even when he fought against the barbarians who invaded the Empire in the past, Shane wasn't this tense.

At that time, he had bravely led the charge against the barbarians, repelling them courageously.

The barbarians had even fled with their tails between their legs at the mere sight of Shane.

Yet, now Shane was nervous, facing a single wolf, not even a monster.

Of course, the silver wolf before him wasn't ordinary.

The wolf emanated a mysterious aura, and its large size indicated it was undoubtedly a magical beast.

Even so, Shane could easily defeat it if he set his mind to it.

Even the Ice Trolls that inhabited the north weren't a difficult match for Shane.

But that was only when Shane had no one to protect.

Right now, behind Shane stood a boy about ten years old.

This handsome boy, with snow-white skin and jet-black hair, was the

heir to the Castarck family, who ruled the northern part of the Empire.

Carl Castarck.

The Castarck family wielded absolute power in the northern regions of the Empire.

The head of the Castarck family and Carl's father, Gildein Castarck, was known as both the Protector of the North and the King of the North.

Thus, the boy Shane was currently protecting, Carl Castarck, was the young noble who would one day become the King of the North.

Protecting Carl safely was Shane's duty.

There was no way Shane wouldn't be tense.

If their opponent were a monster with low intelligence, like an ogre or troll, it would have been much easier.

Such monsters would charge until their death; Shane could simply cut off their heads to end the fight.

But the magical beast, the silver wolf before him, appeared to be quite intelligent.

Even ordinary wolves have the instinct to hunt their prey calmly, so there was no way this silver wolf would recklessly charge at Shane.

Even now, the silver wolf growled, glaring at Shane, but it was clear its attention was on Carl Castarck behind him.

Instinctively, the wolf seemed to think that it couldn't defeat Shane but that the boy, Carl Castarck, was a more manageable target.

That was indeed the case, which made it hard for Shane to move easily.

The moment Shane took even a single step forward to attack, the silver wolf would leap over him and sink its teeth into Carl's neck.

Then, it would run away quickly, fast enough that Shane wouldn't be able to catch up.

"Young Master, you must never leave my side."

Shane spoke to Carl while keeping his gaze fixed on the silver wolf.

The best-case scenario would be if the wolf backed off on its own, but that seemed unlikely.

Carl had already attacked the wolf.

Originally, Shane and Carl were on their way to the Imperial Capital.

They were going to attend Princess Illiana's birthday party, which was to be held in a few days.

There were already rumors circulating in the Empire that Princess Illiana and Carl, the Grand Duke of the North, would marry in the future.

Both were still young, but with their striking looks and compatible status, everyone seemed to welcome the match—even the Emperor.

And most importantly, Princess Illiana had fallen head over heels for Carl. She had fallen for him at first sight when he visited the capital before.

So, Illiana had invited Carl to her birthday party this time.

No one would decline an invitation from the Princess.

Naturally, Carl headed to the capital, with Shane as his escort.

Shane was an excellent knight from the North but also Carl's swordsmanship teacher, so it made sense for him to accompany Carl.

The journey had been uneventful.

Because of Carl's high status, dozens of knights and soldiers accompanied him, leaving no gaps in their protection, aside from Shane.

However, Carl found the journey to the capital boring and expressed to Shane his desire to go hunting after arriving at the nearby city of Sierra.

He wanted to see firsthand what kinds of monsters inhabited the central forest of the Empire, as opposed to the northern mountains.

Moreover, he wanted to leave the other escorts in the city and go out with just Shane, arguing that traveling in a large group drew unnecessary attention and was cumbersome.

“Sir Shane is more than enough. The other knights and soldiers won’t be of much help anyway.”

Shane agreed with Carl to some extent.

Too many escorts would only draw more attention and make things complicated.

Shane alone was sufficient to protect Carl.

So, Carl and Shane left the city and entered the forest.

Shane had initially warned Carl.

He told him not to attack any monster or beast recklessly, no matter what they encountered.

Shane was confident he could handle most monsters, but there was always a chance something could go wrong.

It wouldn’t be too late to understand their opponent slowly before hunting.

But Carl ignored Shane’s warning and shot an arrow the moment he saw the silver wolf.

The silver wolf, which had been walking with a rabbit in its mouth, didn’t get hit by the arrow, but it seemed furious.

With a fierce roar, it attempted to attack Carl.

Thankfully, Shane drew his sword and blocked it just in time.

If his reaction had been even slightly slower, the silver wolf would have bitten Carl's neck.

And now, they were stuck in a standoff.

Neither the silver wolf nor Shane moved recklessly.

"Damn it."

Shane was regretting his decision.

If he had just brought one more knight or soldier, he wouldn't have to worry about the silver wolf before him now.

If someone could protect Carl, Shane was confident he could plunge his sword into the wolf's neck immediately.

"But in this situation..."

It was at that moment.

Something dropped between the silver wolf and Shane.

Thud.

With a light sound, a girl landed on the ground.

Shane broke into a cold sweat as he looked at the girl.

The girl's approach had been so fast that Shane hadn't even sensed her presence.

If she had been an assassin, Shane would have died without even realizing it.

The girl met Shane's gaze, her silver hair fluttering.

She seemed to be around ten years old, about the same age as Carl, who was standing behind Shane.

But her eyes, calm and emotionless to the point of emptiness, were

far too mature for her age.

Even Shane, who had faced countless trials on the battlefield, found it hard to discern the emotions in her indifferent eyes.

As the girl brushed her messy silver hair behind her ear, her pointed ears were revealed.

The girl was an elf.

Shane didn't know how to interpret the situation.

He couldn't tell if the elf girl was an ally or an enemy.

For now, the girl stood facing Shane with the wolf behind her.

Just as Shane was shielding Carl Castarck, the girl was shielding the wolf.

"Is that wolf... yours?"

Shane asked.

As he spoke, he noticed that the silver wolf and the girl had similar features. They both had silver hair and red eyes.

"It's my wolf."

The girl replied in a monotone voice that didn't match her young age.

"Don't bully it."

Shane inwardly felt relieved at her words.

If the wolf's owner had appeared, the situation could be resolved peacefully.

In any case, avoiding a fight was the best option for now.

"Understood. There seems to have been some misunderstanding with the wolf, but if you back off, we won't think of attacking either."

Shane sheathed his sword and straightened his posture.

"I am Shane, a knight serving the Castarck family in the North. And the person behind me is the heir of the Castarck family..."

Before Shane could finish his introduction,

The girl turned away and started petting the wolf's jaw while standing on tiptoe.

"Ahem..."

Feeling awkward, Shane cleared his throat and spoke to Carl, who was standing behind him.

"Young Master, perhaps it would be best to return to the city for today..."

At that moment, Carl stepped beside Shane and shouted at the elf girl.

"Hey, Elf! How dare you! Do you know who you are ignoring? I am Carl Castarck, the Grand Duke of the North! State your name and show your respect immediately!"

Shane's eyes widened in surprise.

It was rare for Carl, usually a bit arrogant but always cautious and careful, to shout at a stranger like this.

The elf girl, however, did not react much to Carl's outburst.

If anything, she glanced at Carl with a disinterested expression, as if to say, "Why is this dog barking?"

Then, she gracefully leaped onto the wolf's back.

A small smile crept onto her lips.

"Hey! Elf!"

Carl grew even more furious at her smile.

"Get off the wolf at once! Can't you hear me speaking? Such insolence!"

If this were the city and the opponent were just a merchant, Carl's status would have been enough.

The person would have immediately bowed their head to Carl.

But this was the forest, and the opponent was an elf.

An elf, a creature of the forest, would hardly care about Carl's status.

The elf girl gently patted the wolf's head as if it were

very dear and whispered,

"Let's go, Ghost."

With that, the wolf, carrying the girl, kicked off the ground and dashed deeper into the forest.

Shane and Carl could only stand there, dumbfounded, staring in the direction where the wolf had disappeared.

Chapter 15 : Sierra City (1)

Ghost ran through the forest like a whirlwind.

From Ariel's perspective, riding on Ghost's back, the scenery of the forest whizzed by, and a refreshing wind blew against her face.

'This is it.'

Ariel nodded in satisfaction.

Riding on Ghost, the silver wolf, was much more enjoyable than she had anticipated.

It felt like riding a roller coaster.

Of course, if Ariel were to run at full speed herself, she would be much faster than Ghost, but the feeling was different.

Ghost ran for a while and then stopped at the edge of a hill.

It was a place where the entire forest could be seen at a glance.

Ariel jumped down from Ghost.

"Well done, Ghost."

She then stroked Ghost's jaw.

Ghost seemed to be in a good mood too, looking quite pleased.

Panting with its tongue out, it almost seemed like it was smiling.

"Sister!!"

Lu flew in quickly from behind.

“How could you just leave on your own like that?!”

Lu, who seemed exhausted from flying, perched on Ariel’s shoulder, panting heavily.

“Huff... This silver wolf... It doesn’t seem to be wary of you anymore, Sister ?”

Ariel nodded in response to Lu’s comment.

“Ghost.”

“Ghost...?”

“The name.”

“Ah...”

Lu looked a bit puzzled.

“Ghost.” It seemed like an odd name for this silver wolf, which was clearly female.

“Ghost, do you want to come with me?”

Ariel asked Ghost. It seemed like Ghost understood her words.

The wolf nodded and licked Ariel’s cheek.

Ariel smiled slightly, and Lu crossed his arms arrogantly.

“Hey, Ghost. I know you’re a magical beast, but still, I’m higher in rank. I’ve been with sister longer, so... Whoa, hey!”

Ghost licked Lu as well.

Lu, who was only the size of a finger, was instantly drenched in Ghost’s saliva.

“Stop licking me!”

Lu shook his body and flew up into the air, while Ariel climbed back onto Ghost’s back.

“Let’s go, Ghost.”

“Awoo!”

Ghost howled vigorously and began running through the forest again, just as fiercely as before.

The direction was toward the city.

Thanks to Ghost’s speed, Ariel arrived in the city of Sierra not long after.

There was a long line of people at the gate leading into Sierra.

Ariel joined the line, realizing she had to wait to enter the city.

“Huh?”

“What is that?”

“A wolf?”

People’s gazes naturally focused on Ariel.

Ariel was still riding on Ghost.

With Ghost’s fur being silver and its size so large, it was only natural that it would draw people’s attention.

“Haha, everyone is looking at us.”

Lu, standing on Ghost’s head, shrugged.

Having already experienced this at Herrington Village, they were now used to people’s stares.

Back then, the attention was because they were an elf and a fairy, but this time, it also included the giant silver wolf.

“Being so popular can be tiring. Haha.”

Lu seemed oddly pleased, but Ariel paid no attention to the people’s gazes.

She kept her back straight, looking ahead, while her hand continued to stroke Ghost's soft fur.

There was some concern that Ghost might go wild among the crowd, but fortunately, that didn't happen.

It seemed Ghost could be perfectly controlled by Ariel.

As the line to the gate slowly moved forward, it was finally Ariel's turn.

The guard, startled by Ghost, made Ariel dismount. After all, they needed to check her identity.

"Uh, an elf...?"

And then, seeing Ariel's pointed ears, the guard was startled again.

It was rare for an elf to pass through a city gate.

And in those cases, the elf was often a captive slave, so there was usually no need to check their identity.

They only needed to check the identity of the person who owned the elf as a slave.

"Hmm..."

The guard realized that this matter was beyond his authority, so he called for his superior.

The superior, seeing Ariel, Lu, and Ghost, was also visibly surprised.

"Um... Do you have anything to prove your identity? A mercenary badge, a guild certificate, or perhaps an invitation from a noble family?"

At the superior's words, Ariel looked troubled. She had none of those.

"Well, if you don't have anything to prove your identity, you can't pass through the gate."

Normally, even without such proof, they would take a toll and record

the purpose of the visit to allow entry through the gate.

But since the visitors were an elf, a fairy, and a wolf, the situation was more complicated.

Currently, the city of Sierra was in a bit of a state of emergency.

Due to Princess Illiana's upcoming birthday, many high-ranking nobles were passing through Sierra on their way to the capital.

An elf and a fairy might be one thing, but allowing such a large wolf to pass through could lead to serious trouble if an accident occurred.

Ariel's face fell when she heard they couldn't enter.

She had wanted to taste delicious food and see how people lived in the city, but now she couldn't.

Seeing Ariel's expression, Lu got angry.

"Hey, human! Our Nunim won't do anything! She didn't cause any trouble in the human village before; in fact, she helped. We plan to behave in this city too!"

"But it's an emergency right now... If you leave the wolf outside the city, we might let you pass."

The guard offered a compromise, but Ariel didn't like it.

She didn't want to leave Ghost, whom she had just befriended, alone outside.

"What a hassle! Humans really do make life complicated!"

While Lu was grumbling, someone approached them.

"Oh, Ariel?"

It was a middle-aged man with a friendly face.

It was Lloyd, the merchant to whom Ariel had sold the troll in Herrington Village.

“What brings you here?”

Lloyd seemed genuinely pleased to see Ariel.

No wonder, since he had made quite a profit by purchasing a troll from Ariel.

“Who...?”

Ariel didn't remember Lloyd.

At that time, Ariel had only been interested in selling the troll and hadn't paid much attention to him.

“Sister, he's the merchant who bought the troll in Herrington Village.”

When Lu whispered this, Ariel finally nodded.

Lloyd, who overheard the whisper, scratched his head with an awkward expression.

“Haha, so you're trying to enter the city? If you need, I could vouch for you.”

Lloyd was a merchant affiliated with a trading company, a fairly well-known one in the Empire.

If Lloyd vouched for her, Ariel could easily pass through the city gate.

“Please.”

Ariel said, and Lloyd happily wrote a certificate of guarantee.

“Then, have a good time.”

The guard seemed slightly worried, but he eventually allowed Ariel, Lu, and Ghost to enter the city.

Once inside, Lloyd spoke to Ariel.

“Thanks a lot for last time. I got a lot of praise at the trading company for buying that troll. If you ever have another monster

corpse to sell, let me know.”

Lloyd was a merchant.

He hadn’t provided a guarantee for Ariel without a reason.

He thought there might be another chance to buy a troll from Ariel in the future, so he wanted to maintain a good relationship.

With just a bit more achievement, Lloyd could get promoted within the trading company.

Thus, he was highly motivated and eager to seize any opportunity.

“I have.”

Ariel said casually.

“Troll corpses.”

“What? Really?!”

“And many other things.”

“!!”

Ariel had defeated all the monsters she had encountered in the forest.

All their corpses were stored intact in her inventory.

There were even seven troll corpses.

She had no particular use for them, so selling them to Lloyd was beneficial for Ariel.

“I’ll show you.”

As Ariel said this, she extended her hand forward. Lloyd hurriedly stopped her in a panic.

“No, no, not here. People are passing by.”

In Herrington Village, troll corpses had suddenly appeared out of thin

air.

If the same thing happened here, the guards would rush over.

“We might as well go to our trading company’s warehouse. Since we have to transport them anyway, it’s better to show them there.”

Following Lloyd to the trading company’s warehouse, Ariel pulled the monster corpses out of her inventory.

Since Lloyd seemed to favor troll corpses, she first laid out seven of them on the ground.

Seeing the seven troll corpses lined up neatly, Lloyd was at a loss for words.

“D-Did you take down all of these?”

“Yes.”

“That’s impressive...”

Lloyd was genuinely astonished.

It wasn’t just that she had seven troll corpses, which were notoriously hard to find, but the condition of the corpses was pristine.

Even though the last troll had been headless, he had made quite a profit; this time, there was only a small hole in the forehead.

Lloyd couldn’t contain his excitement.

If he could buy all these troll corpses, it wouldn’t just be a promotion; he might even become the branch manager overseeing the entire city.

With a trembling voice, Lloyd said, “A-Ariel... I’ll buy all of these...”

“Okay.”

Lloyd’s surprises didn’t end there.

Ariel continued pulling out monster corpses from her inventory.

Orcs, goblins, minotaurs, owlbeats, wyverns, and more...

Even the corpse of a hobgoblin, known as the Goblin King, was there, all in excellent condition.

Chapter 16 : Sierra City (2)

“It must have been difficult to capture the Goblin King because he’s so cunning... And in such perfect condition...”

Lloyd stared at Ariel with an incredulous expression.

Getting a troll was one thing, but the Goblin King’s corpse was another matter entirely; it wasn’t easy to obtain.

If he made a deal, it could be more profitable than the troll.

“I’ll buy them all.”

Lloyd decided to purchase all of Ariel’s monster corpses.

Even aside from the troll and the Goblin King, the other corpses were in excellent condition and were worth buying.

High-quality monster corpses have many uses and would be in demand anywhere.

“Um, but this is beyond my authority. Please wait a moment. I’ll bring the person in charge.”

Lloyd didn’t have enough funds to buy all of Ariel’s monster corpses himself.

He would have to use the company’s funds.

Though his own profit would decrease, the outcome would be guaranteed.

After a while, Lloyd returned with the person in charge of the company, who also looked surprised when he saw Ariel’s monster corpses.

“Oh... This is incredible...”

The company Lloyd belonged to valued trust and integrity.

They never haggled unfairly, no matter the situation.

Thanks to this, they had built a reputation and become one of the most recognized companies in the empire.

The person Lloyd brought offered a fair price to Ariel.

“How about this amount?”

“Alright.”

Ariel agreed immediately.

She couldn't be sure if it was a fair amount, but it didn't really matter.

After all, monster corpses could always be obtained again.

“Here it is.”

The company's staff placed a large, heavy box in front of Ariel with a thud.

The box was filled to the brim with gold coins.

“Wow, sister, you're rich now!”

Lu exclaimed joyfully from the side, and Ariel put the box of gold coins into her inventory.

“Is it okay if you don't count it?”

At Lloyd's question, Ariel nodded.

If the company valued trust and integrity, Ariel preferred clean and cool transactions.

“Yeah, well, there's no need to count. We're very thorough with these things.”

Lloyd laughed heartily.

“By the way, Ariel, have you decided on a place to stay?”

“Not yet.”

“Would you like to stay at our company’s accommodation? It’s a free place reserved for VIPs, and the facilities are excellent. There’s even a room with a yard, so you can keep your wolf with you.”

If Ariel chose another accommodation, Ghost might be a problem.

She wouldn’t be able to take a giant wolf into a room, so she’d likely have to use the stables.

Ariel didn’t want that either.

“Please.”

Thus, Ariel headed to the luxury accommodation provided only for the company’s VIPs.

The place Lloyd guided her to was even better than she expected.

The space was large, and there was a yard where Ghost could stay comfortably.

“Ariel, I don’t know how long you’ll stay in the city, but you can stay as long as you like. The company will cover all the expenses.”

“Thank you.”

“Haha, I’m the one who should be thanking you. If there’s another transaction in the future, please do business with us again.”

Lloyd was grinning from ear to ear.

The company was in an uproar because of the transaction with Ariel.

It was the largest deal they’d made recently, and the profits would be enormous.

“Thanks to you, I’ll be able to make a great contribution to the

company. I'll definitely treat you later."

"Okay."

"See you next time, Ariel. If you need anything, feel free to ask anytime."

After Lloyd left, Ariel also prepared to go out.

Since she was in the city, she planned to look around and buy a few things.

Unfortunately, she decided to leave Ghost behind.

Bringing Ghost to a crowded place could cause problems.

Besides, Ghost would probably prefer to rest in the yard rather than wander around a crowded place.

"I'll bring you something tasty."

Ariel patted Ghost's chin and left the accommodation.

Festivals were taking place all over the city of Sierra.

Many high-ranking nobles were passing through Sierra on their way to the capital for Princess Iliana's upcoming birthday.

Street vendors were more abundant than usual, and there were frequent performances like plays and concerts.

Naturally, the city's atmosphere was lively, and the streets were crowded with people.

Ariel and Lu walked through the bustling crowd.

They bought several clothes from a clothing store, meat for Ghost, and wine for Lu, but it drained their energy.

Ariel turned back towards the accommodation, eager to rest after sightseeing.

But she suddenly stopped in front of a shop.

“Oh, what a sweet smell, sister.”

Lu sniffed the air and slowly floated up.

Ariel also paused, enticed by the sweet smell.

The aroma was wafting from the shop in front of her.

The sign read “Delight,” so it seemed to be a dessert shop.

“Shall we go in?”

Lu gestured towards the shop.

Ariel nodded.

She realized she hadn’t bought anything for herself, even though she’d bought things for Ghost and Lu.

The cream buns she had brought from Herrington Village were running out, so it seemed like a good idea to buy some sweet desserts here.

Ding.

The shop’s interior was quite luxurious as they entered.

The dessert specialty store, “Delight,” was a bakery that had achieved great success by catering to high-class nobles.

Their main store was in the capital of the empire, with branches in various cities.

Perhaps because of this, the shop’s interior was lavish, and most of the customers were noblewomen or daughters of noble families.

It was obvious at a glance that the prices would be high, but Ariel didn’t mind.

Lloyd had told her that the money from selling the monster corpses would be enough to spend freely for several years.

Ariel quickly walked up to the showcase.

A neatly dressed employee smiled and greeted her.

“Welcome, customer. What would you like to order?”

Ariel stared at the showcase.

Inside were various desserts, all of which looked delicious, making it hard to choose.

But one in particular caught Ariel’s eye.

“This one...”

Ariel pointed to a dessert in the center of the showcase.

A strawberry tart.

It was a dessert with red syrup and strawberries on top of a round brown pastry.

“Customer, the strawberry tart is sold out.”

The employee looked disappointed as he spoke.

“It’s one of our shop’s most popular items, and it’s usually sold out by late morning, so you have to come in the morning if you want to try it.”

Ariel bit her lip.

Hearing that it was a popular item only made her want it more.

She wanted to break the showcase right then and there to get that strawberry tart, even if it was a replica.

Ariel lowered her head and turned away.

The other items looked delicious too, but it seemed like nothing would do if it wasn’t the strawberry tart.

As they left the shop with nothing, Lu tried to console Ariel.

“Sister, let’s try coming back tomorrow morning.”

“Okay...”

Ariel decided she would have to make do with cream buns for her meal tonight.

She started walking back to the accommodation again.

“Ah.”

Just then, a boy in front of her flinched when he saw Ariel.

“You, you are!!”

A handsome boy with black hair.

It was Carl Castarck, whom she had encountered in the forest.

Beside him was his bodyguard knight, Shane.

Shane also looked surprised to see Ariel.

Who could have guessed they would run into each other here after parting ways in the forest?

“Elf! How are you here!”

Carl reacted strongly, approaching Ariel.

But Ariel glanced at Carl with an expressionless face and continued walking without a word.

A clear sign of indifference.

Right now, Ariel’s mind was entirely focused on the strawberry tart. She didn’t even register Carl’s presence.

Watching Ariel walk away, Carl didn’t know how to react.

At first, he felt embarrassed, but soon his pride was wounded, and anger surged.

He had gone out of his way to acknowledge her, but Ariel didn’t even bother to respond.

Just like in the forest.

“Stop!”

Carl forgot about his dignity and shouted loudly.

“Stop right there! Damn elf!”

“Y-Young master...”

Shane hurriedly tried to calm Carl down.

“There are many nobles around. They all recognize you, young master.”

If the story that “Carl Castarck, the grand duke’s heir of the North, lost his temper and shouted in the street” spread among the nobles, it would be a disaster.

The Castarck family’s reputation would be tarnished, and it could even affect his future marriage to the princess.

But Carl had already lost control of himself.

He kept shouting at Ariel as he chased after her.

“Elf! Stop! That’s an order! Stop right now!!”

Finally, Ariel stopped and turned to look at Carl.

“Huh?”

Ariel looked confused.

Someone had been shouting from behind, and it was so noisy that she turned around to see a boy walking towards her.

He was furious, panting heavily...

Carl walked up to Ariel with a furious expression, his eyes wide with anger.

“Do you think you can make a fool out of me? Do you even know

who I am? I am Carl Castarck, heir to the house that guards the northern empire...”

“Oh.”

At that moment, Ariel clapped her hands lightly. She finally recognized the boy.

He was the one who had been with the knight she had faced off against with Ghost in the forest.

“Hello.”

Ariel greeted Carl.

Looking back, she was grateful to Carl since it was thanks to him that she had become closer to Ghost.

Carl froze when Ariel suddenly greeted him.

Though Carl didn’t realize it, his face had turned as red as a tomato.

Chapter 17 : Sierra City (3)

Carl fidgeted, avoiding Ariel's gaze.

A shy smile had crept onto Carl's lips, and his face, from his neck to his ears, had turned bright red.

Finally, Ariel had acknowledged him and even greeted him. In hindsight, it wasn't much, but Carl felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment.

"Uh, hello..."

Carl stuttered as he greeted her back. Inside, he felt a strange emotion stirring, and his heart pounded as if he had sprinted across the northern mountains.

"Yes."

Ariel replied briefly and then turned away, walking again.

It seemed the exchange was over, and she had no further interest in him, displaying a slightly cold demeanor.

This time, Carl couldn't bring himself to stop Ariel.

Unlike before, he didn't have the courage.

All he could do now was watch her back with his flushed face.

Shane, standing next to him, watched Carl with a complex expression.

"Sister, who was that human boy just now? Do you know him? He is quite handsome for a kid, but his attitude toward you was very rude. If he dares to act disrespectfully toward you again, I, Lu, will not stand by."

On their way back to the lodging, Lu grumbled.

“Even if this is a human city, no one should treat you lightly.”

On the other hand, Ariel remained indifferent. The boy she had met in the forest wanted to say hello, so she simply reciprocated—nothing more, nothing less.

Carl had long vanished from Ariel’s thoughts.

Her mind was now wholly occupied with the thought of the strawberry tart.

Its delicious appearance justified its popularity and the fact that it sold out before noon.

Ariel’s eyes gleamed with determination.

“Tomorrow, for sure...!”

There was nothing she could do today due to a lack of information, but tomorrow would be different.

As soon as the morning light broke, she would rush to Delight and get her hands on that strawberry tart.

As Shane feared, the events of the afternoon quickly spread among the nobility.

And the story had already become quite exaggerated.

“Did you hear? Young Lord Carl from the North supposedly courted an elf on the street.”

“They say he got rejected in the end.”

“So, what happens with the princess now?”

Shane felt a headache coming on.

Less than a day had passed since the incident, and rumors were already spreading. The tongues of nobles were indeed loose.

It was only a matter of time before these rumors reached the capital and the princess's ears.

By then, the story would probably be even more distorted.

What was merely an approach could be exaggerated into a full-fledged marriage proposal.

In reality, Carl had only shouted at the elf to stop and exchanged greetings.

“Sigh...”

Shane let out a deep sigh.

He knew he shared responsibility for this mess. It was his failure to properly support Carl.

Attending the princess's birthday party with such rumors circulating was a dreadful thought.

People would whisper, and some might even directly ask about what happened.

“I'll have to prepare a plausible excuse...”

Fabricating excuses was an unappealing task for Shane, who had spent his life wielding a sword.

And even if he came up with a good excuse, most people would likely remain skeptical.

“I have no face to return to the North...”

Carl's father, Grand Duke Castarck, trusted Shane greatly.

That was why Shane had been sent along on Carl's journey—to protect him and ensure no unfortunate incidents occurred.

But now, such a major incident had taken place.

There was no way Shane could return to the North with any dignity.

He would surely be punished. Though he might not lose his knightly title, he would probably have to endure a pay cut.

“It can’t be helped...”

Shane forced himself to pull himself together.

What’s done is done; he could only do better moving forward.

With that resolve, he returned to the lodging, only to find Carl missing.

Only the soldiers of the Castarck family were present.

Shane asked one of them, “Where is the young master?”

“He said he was going to train his swordsmanship and went to the back garden.”

While staying in the city, the Castarck family had rented an entire building, allowing them to use the back garden freely.

Carl was probably out there training.

Normally, Shane would have found this admirable. After all, one can never train too much.

“At this hour...?”

But now, something felt off. It was too late for training.

No matter how much Carl liked training, he had never practiced so late at night.

Feeling a sense of unease, Shane walked toward the back garden.

Swish! Swish!

“Huff, huff...”

Indeed, Carl was in the back garden, training with his sword. He was drenched in sweat, panting heavily, swinging his sword wildly.

“Young master.”

Shane approached Carl.

“That’s enough for today.”

This wasn’t even training.

Carl was merely swinging his sword frantically. His form was broken, and he was on the verge of exhaustion.

“Ah, Sir Shane, I couldn’t sleep...”

Hearing Carl’s words, Shane fell silent.

He didn’t ask why Carl couldn’t sleep or why he was madly swinging his sword late into the night.

“You should rest now.”

Shane said, and Carl did not argue any further.

“Yes, Sir.”

Despite the unexpected events of the day, Carl was usually very mature.

He possessed an unusual calmness and strong spirit for his age.

Because of this, Carl was the hope of the North.

It was believed that one day, he would grow up to be a great king of the North.

“But even a young master like him...”

Shane stopped himself there. It was better not to entertain such ominous thoughts. They might just become reality.

It was only a moment. Even someone like Carl, who was human and male, could have a fleeting lapse of emotion.

Once they reached the capital and Carl saw Princess Iliana, he would

quickly forget about the elf.

He had to. He must.

Shane hoped fervently for this as he entered the lodging with Carl.

After completing his training—or rather, his “aggressive sword-swinging”—Carl washed himself with cold water and lay down on the bed.

His body was exhausted. He didn’t have the strength to even lift a finger.

Normally, in such a state, he would fall asleep the moment he closed his eyes, but not tonight.

Instead, his mind was clear. He could see Ariel in front of him.

The graceful and fluid movement of Ariel riding the wolf in the forest, her cold and aloof eyes...

They wouldn’t leave his mind.

Smack!

Carl slapped his own cheek.

He must not think about her. If he thought about it, that elf had nothing to do with him.

Carl was upset by Ariel’s indifferent attitude, but honestly, he wasn’t angry enough to justify it.

He usually despised how nobles flaunted their titles and backgrounds.

Now, he was doing exactly that himself, and it filled him with self-loathing.

After Ariel had left the forest, Carl had thought he’d never see her again. But he encountered her immediately upon returning to the city.

The emotion he felt at that moment was joy.

He wanted to speak to Ariel, to acknowledge her.

But Ariel had not even looked at Carl, and in frustration, he lost his temper.

He wanted to make Ariel submit, even if it meant flaunting his title and background.

He wanted Ariel to notice him.

Carl's wish had come true.

Ariel had remembered him and greeted him.

Even now, Carl's heart raced when he thought of that moment.

He hadn't felt like this even when Princess Iliana showed interest in him.

Not just the princess, but even when the daughters of other high-ranking noble families approached him or tried to impress him, Carl had remained indifferent.

But with just one word of greeting from Ariel, Carl was flustered and at a loss.

Such reactions were something Carl himself usually saw in the young noblewomen he greeted.

He found himself ridiculous for such behavior.

As a noble, he should have maintained his dignity and composure, not fumble before a girl. It was humiliating.

Yet, here he was doing exactly that...

In front of Ariel.

"This is where it ends."

Carl glared up at the ceiling with his eyes wide open.

Even though he had acted somewhat foolishly today, causing strange

rumors to spread, this was it.

No more.

After today, he would stop thinking about that elf.

He would forget about her.

Carl had never been interested in women.

He admired people like his father and Sir Shane, fine knights, and everything else was irrelevant to him.

Even Princess Iliana hadn't stirred anything in him.

Carl only focused on training his swordsmanship and studying to rule the North in the future.

He was quite proud of himself for that.

So, after today, Carl intended to return to his former, respectable self.

The strong-willed heir of the North.

Someone like him shouldn't be swayed by a mere elf.

As he resolved this, Ariel no longer flickered before his eyes.

Thanks to that, Carl was finally able to sleep soundly...

"Young master, it's morning."

"Already!"

But soon, Shane's voice woke him up.

Outside the window, the morning sun had risen.

"I know you trained late into the night yesterday, but that's no excuse for sleeping in."

Shane spoke mercilessly, and Carl had no choice but to get up from the bed without a wink of sleep.

Chapter 18 : Sierra City (4)

“Young master... where are you planning to go?”

“To Delight, Sir Shane.”

“Delight? Isn’t that the pastry shop that sells desserts?”

“That’s right.”

“Why would you go to such a place...?”

Shane looked at Carl with a bewildered expression.

Delight was a large and famous pastry shop with branches all across the empire.

It was a place with a luxurious interior that sold sweet desserts, a somewhat feminine and elegant space.

Typically, it was frequented by noble ladies, and men tended to avoid going there.

Men who went there often had an unusual reputation, or at least that was the perception.

Of course, it was just a stereotype, but sometimes stereotypes could be the most intimidating, especially among the nobility.

“Perhaps because of all the hard training yesterday, I have a craving for something sweet today. I know that the best place to get such things is at Delight.”

As Carl spoke casually, Shane gulped.

Shane had known Carl since he was a baby and understood his personality better than anyone else.

Normally, Carl would never look at desserts, no matter how intense his training had been.

Meat, perhaps, but not sweets.

Besides, Carl often said, "Desserts are something women eat."

So, the sudden reason for wanting to go to Delight...

"No way!"

For a moment, Shane recalled yesterday's events.

Now that he thought about it, he had seen that elf at Delight yesterday.

The elf, upon leaving Delight, had been conversing with a fairy.

"Hmm, Sister, let's come back tomorrow morning."

"...Okay."

Shane looked at Carl again.

Now that he noticed, Carl had his hair slicked back and was dressed in formal attire.

It was an unusual appearance for someone who didn't usually care about his looks.

"It's clear."

Shane narrowed his eyes.

Carl wasn't going to Delight for desserts.

He was definitely going because of that elf. When Shane stared intently, Carl coughed awkwardly.

"Ahem, anyway, I'm going to Delight."

"But... you know what kind of image that place has, don't you, young master?"

“You taught me that only small-minded people care about others’ prejudices.”

Shane was speechless. He had certainly taught Carl that.

“To think he would use that against me here...!”

Carl was still young but a sharp boy.

No matter what Shane said, he had no chance of winning this argument.

Carl would find a way to go to Delight.

“Understood. I will accompany you to Delight...”

“You don’t have to come into the shop, Sir. It might be better if you just wait at the entrance.”

“...Understood.”

While his duty was to guard Carl, Shane had no desire to enter the shop.

He’d rather stand guard at the entrance than suffer inside a shop full of young ladies.

“Let’s go, Sir.”

Carl strode forward energetically, and Shane let out a sigh, quietly following behind.

A nagging feeling grew in Shane’s mind that things were about to get complicated.

Ariel suddenly sat up in bed and looked at the clock.

The sun had been up for quite a while. She had overslept.

On a regular day, oversleeping wouldn’t matter, but not today.

Today was the day she had promised herself to eat Delight’s strawberry tart! She had to hurry before they sold out.

Ariel hastily threw off her pajamas and changed into her outdoor clothes.

Because of her rush, Lu, who had been nestled in her pajama folds, was flung onto the bed.

Still, Lu did not wake up, heavily drunk from last night's wine.

Deciding she didn't have time to wake Lu, Ariel quickly greeted the ghost before dashing out of the inn.

She ran so fast she practically blurred, arriving at Delight in the blink of an eye.

Her hair was disheveled, and her clothes weren't properly put together, but none of that mattered.

Ariel immediately opened the door to Delight.

Ding.

Inside, a long line of people was already forming, all waiting to buy strawberry tarts.

Ariel took her place at the back of the line, glancing ahead nervously.

She prayed fervently that the strawberry tarts wouldn't sell out before it was her turn.

Even after she joined the line, more people kept coming in to buy strawberry tarts. Before she knew it, the line had grown long behind her.

"Wow, it's an elf."

"Why is an elf in a place like this...?"

"She's really beautiful."

People whispered as they looked at Ariel.

Even in the city, it was rare to see an elf, so naturally, she drew attention.

But that only lasted for a moment.

“Sir Shane, I’ll be right back.”

As a boy entered Delight, the people’s gazes shifted from Ariel to him.

A handsome boy with slicked-back hair and dressed in formal attire.

It was Carl.

Currently, there were only women in Delight, with Carl being the only man.

While being a man wasn’t more eye-catching than an elf, Carl’s status made it so.

He was Carl Castarck, the Grand Duke of the North.

There was no one among the empire’s nobility who did not know his name.

With his striking good looks that even captivated Princess Illiana at first sight, and the fact that he would one day hold all power in the North, Carl was famous among noble ladies.

Naturally, his appearance here drew much attention.

“Is that...!”

“Isn’t that the Duke Carl?”

“Why is Duke Carl in a place like this...?”

Furthermore, Carl had taken extra care in his appearance today, and his handsome face shone even more brightly.

Carl, sensing the attention focused on him, took a seat at a table by the window.

Being the center of attention was nothing new to him, so he didn’t feel particularly burdened or uncomfortable.

For Carl, it was a normal occurrence.

“Hmm.”

Carl pretended to look around the store while actually searching for Ariel.

“Since she said she would come today, she must be... Ah!”

He spotted her quickly.

Ariel was standing among the people, waiting in line.

The young ladies nearby were busy sneaking glances at Carl, but Ariel, with a blank expression, was focused solely on what was ahead.

Carl felt his heart start to race again.

As he thought, she was beautiful.

The other young ladies seemed like mere squids in comparison.

Carl's cheeks turned a shade of red, and his eyes became dazed as if he were enchanted.

The observant young ladies quickly noticed where Carl's gaze was directed.

“...Duke Carl is staring at the elf as if he's entranced.”

“So, the rumors that he was courting an elf were true...”

“It must be that elf who supposedly rejected Duke Carl.”

People's gazes shifted back to Ariel, but she paid them no mind.

She simply waited patiently in line for the strawberry tart, and finally, it was her turn.

Ariel eagerly ordered the strawberry tart from the employee.

It was the same employee she had seen yesterday.

“We have exactly one left.”

The employee smiled in relief.

“You’re lucky.”

A faint smile appeared on Ariel’s face as well. It had been a close call, but she finally managed to get the strawberry tart.

“Here you go. Enjoy!”

Receiving the tart from the employee, Ariel turned around. She was planning to return to her lodging and enjoy it immediately.

“Oh no, it’s sold out!”

She heard a voice muttering.

“I really wanted to try Delight’s strawberry tart...”

The muttering came from the girl who had been standing right behind Ariel.

Since the strawberry tart had sold out right when it was Ariel’s turn, the girl had just missed the chance to buy it.

The girl, with red hair and a lively appearance, now looked completely dejected, much like Ariel had the day before.

“I won’t get to eat it today...”

Though the girl’s grumbling caught her attention, Ariel tried to ignore it. Life was harsh, and it was possible to miss out on opportunities.

However, giving up the strawberry tart she had worked so hard to get was not an option.

Ariel silently walked past the girl, but after a few steps, she stopped and looked back.

“Hey.”

“...Huh?”

The girl, who had her head hanging low, slowly lifted her gaze.

“What?”

Ariel raised the strawberry tart she held in her hand.

“Do you want to share this?”

“What did you say...?”

The girl opened her eyes wide in disbelief.

“Are you really going to share it?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you!”

The girl smiled brightly.

Her name was Selly, the third daughter of the Matiel family, a high-ranking noble family in the eastern part of the empire.

Selly, too, was heading to the empire’s capital to attend the princess’s birthday party.

The Matiel family, known for its strict emphasis on grace and appearance... or more accurately, on maintaining a certain body image, strictly prohibited any fattening foods, such as desserts.

Their diet consisted mainly of vegetables, and they were required to endure rigorous exercise daily to maintain their figures.

As a result, all the women of the Matiel family had exceptional physiques. Selly, though still young, had a toned and slender figure.

“But I really hate it.”

Selly said while chewing on the strawberry tart.

“I don’t care if I’m fat and ugly; I just want to live a life where I can

eat things like this without restraint.”

Sitting across from Selly was Ariel, who was also munching on the strawberry tart.

Originally, she had planned to return to her lodging to eat it, but since she decided to share it with Selly, she found a table in Delight and sat down.

“I feel sorry for the princess, but honestly, I have no interest in birthday parties.

I just wanted to escape from my family for a day and eat things like this... By the way, this strawberry tart is incredibly delicious.”

Selly had a look of delight on her face.

“It’s so delicious; it feels like my brain is melting. Ariel, don’t you think so too?”

Ariel nodded slightly.

She wasn’t sure about her brain melting, but the strawberry tart was shockingly good. In her opinion, “exquisite” would be the most fitting description.

“Thank you, Ariel. If you hadn’t shared it with me, I would never have tasted this strawberry tart. I have to leave the city early tomorrow morning.”

Selly smiled warmly.

“So, Ariel, how about spending the day with me? Since you shared the strawberry tart with me, I’d like to return the favor somehow. I’ll make sure we have a lot of fun. What do you think?”

Chapter 19 : Sierra City (5)

“Okay.”

Ariel readily accepted Selly’s proposal to spend the day together.

Since she planned to stay in the city for a while anyway, spending a day like this didn’t seem like a bad idea.

“Ta-da!”

Selly came back with a bunch of desserts.

She claimed it was a reward for sharing the strawberry tart, but to Ariel, it seemed like Selly just wanted to eat them herself.

Although the strawberry tart was Delight’s most popular item, the other desserts were delicious enough.

“Geez!”

While Ariel was munching on a blueberry muffin, Selly wiped the crumbs from Ariel’s mouth with a tissue.

“How can you eat so messily with food all over your mouth like that? I guess elves aren’t much different from humans after all.”

Ariel silently looked at Selly, feeling a little wronged.

She wasn’t usually this messy.

The reason was that she was inhabiting the character of Ariel, whose mouth was smaller than her own.

Besides, Selly’s mouth was also covered with cream.

Ariel took a tissue and wiped Selly’s mouth, and Selly flinched,

looking away in embarrassment.

“Ahem, ahem. Anyway.”

Selly turned her gaze to the window-side table where Carl was sitting.

“Why has Duke Carl been looking over here since earlier? Are the rumors really true?”

Ariel tilted her head.

“Rumors?”

“Yeah, the rumor that Duke Carl proposed to an elf and got rejected! The way he’s been glancing over here since earlier... You’re the elf from the rumors, right, Ariel?”

Ariel gulped down her milk silently.

She had never heard of such a rumor.

More importantly, she was starting to feel drowsy, and her eyelids were getting heavy.

She was experiencing post-meal drowsiness.

“Hmm~ Poor Duke Carl. Judging by his expression, it seems he’s already completely smitten with you, Ariel. So, what’s going to happen with the princess now? This could be quite a serious issue... Ariel?”

Selly, muttering to herself, blinked as she looked at Ariel.

“Ariel, are you... sleeping?”

Ariel was sleeping while sitting upright.

Unlike other noble ladies, Selly wasn’t interested in the opposite sex.

She hated dressing up meticulously or pretending to be prim and proper at social parties.

The only reason she attended social parties was for the food.

There were always delicious foods in abundance!

While Ariel slept, Selly eagerly devoured the desserts.

Thanks to this, Ariel could rest peacefully for a while, and it wasn't until Selly had completely finished the desserts that she stood up.

"Ariel, wake up. It's time to go have some fun!"

Selly gently shook Ariel's shoulder, and Ariel slowly opened her eyes.

Though it was impossible to avoid feeling sleepy after eating, she was quick to wake up if someone nudged her.

Of course, waking up didn't mean she was fully alert.

Ariel swayed as she stood, her eyes half-closed, as if she were drunk.

"This way, this way, Ariel. Oh dear, you're just like a child."

Selly diligently took care of the still half-asleep Ariel.

Looking closely, Ariel's hair was completely tangled, and her clothes were in disarray, with buttons fastened incorrectly and sleeves folded unevenly.

It seemed she had run to Delight right after waking up in the morning, resulting in her messy appearance.

"Are elves usually like this?"

Selly muttered to herself as she brushed Ariel's hair neatly and straightened her clothing.

"There, let's go."

Ariel, half-asleep, was dragged along by Selly as they left Delight.

As soon as the two of them disappeared, Carl, who had been sitting at the window table, stood up as well. There were no signs that he had touched any of the desserts on his table.

Celly dragged Ariel around every corner of the city without pause.

Usually, Selly didn't have any free time, so today she was determined to make the most of it.

Fortunately, several festivals were taking place in the city of Sierra, so there were plenty of things for Selly and Ariel to enjoy.

"Ariel, let's try that!"

Selly pulled Ariel along toward a place where a crowd had gathered.

There, a muscular man was sitting at a table, and the surrounding signs read:

[Arm Wrestling Challenge! Feel Free to Compete!]

The entry fee was one silver coin.

If a contestant could last 5 seconds against the muscular man, they would win a lizardman leather wallet.

If they lasted 10 seconds, they would receive premium-grade minotaur meat as a prize.

"What do you get if you win?"

Selly tilted her head as she looked at the sign.

There was no prize listed for winning the arm-wrestling match.

"Maybe they think no one can beat them? That's a lot of confidence."

Selly smirked.

The arm muscles of the arm-wrestling man were definitely bigger than Selly's head, but the lack of a prize for winning sparked her competitive spirit.

And that was exactly the man's strategy.

He was trying to provoke people's competitive instincts to increase participation.

“Next challenger, please!”

The arm-wrestling man said arrogantly, having just defeated a skinny man in a single second.

“Me!”

Selly stepped forward and shouted.

The arm-wrestling man glanced at her and smirked.

“I won’t go easy on a lady.”

“No need to. I only plan to last 10 seconds.”

Selly tossed a silver coin into the box next to the man and sat down opposite him, looking quite confident.

‘I’ve been working out so hard, how could I not last just 10 seconds?’

In the Martiel family, they never skipped a day of exercise to maintain their figure.

As a result, Selly’s arms were slender but quite muscular.

In fact, Selly had never lost an arm-wrestling match against a boy her age.

So, she thought, maybe she could hold out for 10 seconds.

‘I’ll hold out for 10 seconds and win the premium-grade minotaur meat to share with Ariel!’

Just the thought of premium-grade minotaur meat made her mouth water.

“Start!”

The arm-wrestling match began.

“No way...”

Selly got up from the table with a tearful face. She hadn’t lasted 10

seconds, not even 1 second.

It was, of course, the expected result.

The man's arm was bigger than Selly's head, after all.

No one among the crowd believed Selly would last more than a second.

"Oh... my premium-grade minotaur meat..."

Selly trudged back to Ariel's side.

"Ariel, do you want to give it a try? It's just for fun, anyway."

At Selly's words, Ariel gazed at the arm-wrestling man.

The man looked at Ariel and grinned.

"Oh, an elf? Interesting. For the elf lady, I'll make it 3 seconds. If you can last just 3 seconds, I'll give you the premium-grade minotaur meat."

"Go on, Ariel! Even if you don't last, it's fine. Here's the silver coin."

Selly paid Ariel's entry fee and gently pushed her forward. Eventually, Ariel sat down across from the arm-wrestling man.

From the outside, the size difference between the two was striking. A huge man versus a small girl.

"Go, elf girl! Beat that big guy!"

"Show him what you've got!"

People began cheering for Ariel.

"Alright, get ready."

Somehow, Selly had ended up acting as the referee.

Ariel grasped the arm-wrestling man's hand.

His hand was so thick and large that it seemed to swallow Ariel's hand whole.

“Start!”

With Selly's shout, the arm-wrestling match began.

“Oh, oh, oh...!”

The crowd gasped in astonishment.

They had expected Ariel to be defeated in a second, just like Selly, but surprisingly, Ariel's arm didn't budge.

“One second! Two seconds! Three seconds!!”

The crowd counted out loud, and Selly jumped up and down in excitement.

“Yay! Ariel! You lasted 3 seconds!!”

Meanwhile, the arm-wrestling man's face turned beet red as he struggled with all his might to push down Ariel's arm.

‘How... is this possible...?’

The disbelief was evident in the man's eyes.

‘I can't overpower her...??’

He was a former champion of an arm-wrestling tournament held in the imperial capital, where he had defeated hundreds of participants to claim the trophy.

For him, not being able to overpower a small girl like Ariel was simply incomprehensible.

“Argh!”

A fierce growl erupted from the man's mouth.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and thick veins bulged on his muscular arm. Yet, Ariel's arm remained unmoved.

‘This can’t be...!’

If he considered the possibility of magic, he might have been able to accept it somewhat.

There were spells that could enhance physical strength.

However, the table where he and Ariel were sitting had a magic-sealing circle engraved on it.

This table, used in official arm-wrestling tournaments, prevented any magic from working.

In other words, Ariel was resisting the man’s arm with pure physical strength alone.

“11 seconds! 12 seconds! 13 seconds!!”

By now, it had gone past 10 seconds.

“Go, elf! Win!”

“Go, elf!!”

The crowd was ecstatic.

The atmosphere was electric.

It was thrilling to see a tiny girl face off against a man who seemed impossible to defeat.

‘Damn...!’

The man gritted his teeth, sweat streaming down his face. He was starting to lose strength in his arm.

‘Could it be... that I’m going to lose?’

Just as the man thought that, Ariel spoke in a soft voice.

“Excuse me.”

She asked the man quietly.

“What do I get if I win?”

Chapter 20 : Sierra City (6)

Thud.

The man's arm fell, and the back of his hand hit the table.

In the end, the man was defeated by Ariel.

"Wow! The elf girl won!!"

The onlookers cheered, and Selly hugged Ariel tightly.

"Ariel! You did it! You won!!"

Ariel let go of the man's hand and stood up.

Honestly, from Ariel's perspective, it was a trivial match. She hadn't even used much strength.

If Ariel had used her full strength, the man's hand would have been crushed to powder.

"Haha..."

The man let out a hollow laugh. He couldn't believe it, but he had definitely lost.

"And so easily, too..."

The spectators didn't realize it, but having arm-wrestled Ariel himself, the man knew for sure.

Ariel had used only a tiny bit of strength at the very end to push the man's arm down.

Before that, when the man was struggling with all his might, Ariel hadn't even been using her strength at all.

It was a complete defeat.

There was no room for excuses.

Even if they tried again, he would definitely lose. The man looked at Ariel with a tired face.

“Elf lady, I asked what you’d like if you won, didn’t I?”

A resigned smile appeared on the man’s lips.

“You can take whatever you want. Whether it’s the lizardman leather wallet, the prime-grade minotaur meat, or even the entire cash box with the entry fees in it, you can have it all. You beat me, after all.”

The man laughed while rubbing his throbbing arm.

“Who would’ve thought I’d see a day like this? I guess you can’t judge by appearances alone. Who knew that a delicate-looking elf girl could be this strong?”

When the man admitted his defeat gracefully, the crowd cheered even louder.

“Wow! That was awesome!!”

“What a great fight!”

Ariel approached the man and whispered what she wanted.

“What?”

The man looked puzzled.

“You want the lizardman leather wallet...? Is that really all?”

“Yes.”

“No, I mean... I said you could take anything. Your friend, the red-haired lady, seems to want the prime-grade minotaur meat.”

The man pointed at Selly.

Ariel looked at Selly, and Selly shrugged her shoulders.

“I didn’t win, Ariel. Take whatever you want. Don’t worry about me.”

“The lizardman leather wallet.”

Seeing Ariel speak firmly, the man scratched his head.

The lizardman leather wallet was honestly worth much less than a single silver coin, which was the entry fee.

With a silver coin, you could buy ten lizardman leather wallets.

‘And yet she wants that...’

The man, still puzzled, handed the lizardman leather wallet to Ariel.

After all, he had promised to give her whatever she wanted, and he couldn’t force anything else on her.

On the other hand, he felt relieved. If Ariel had taken the cash box with the entry fees, the man would have had to go hungry for a few days.

‘Was she considering my situation...?’

The man gave a sheepish smile.

“Thank you, elf lady. Come visit again sometime. Just... don’t join next time, okay? I need to make a living too. Hahaha.”

“See you next time, mister!”

“Goodbye, ladies!”

Watching Selly and Ariel leave, Carl got up from where he had been crouching by the fountain. His legs felt numb from sitting there for so long.

“...What just happened, Sir Shane?”

Carl asked Shane, who was getting up beside him.

Since leaving Delight, Carl had been following Ariel closely.

As a result, he had watched the entire arm-wrestling match from his hiding spot by the fountain.

“Ariel won an arm-wrestling match against that man; is that even possible?”

“Hmm...”

Shane stroked his chin.

It was certainly perplexing.

Considering the man’s bulging muscles, it seemed impossible for a slender elf like Ariel to win.

But Ariel had won effortlessly.

“I’m not sure. What I do know for certain is that magic wasn’t involved.”

Shane was a skilled knight. He could sense the flow of mana.

If Ariel had used magic, Shane would have noticed.

“The elf girl overpowered the man with pure strength. Maybe she has undergone immense training, or perhaps there’s a unique elven training method... But more importantly.”

Shane glanced sharply at Carl.

“Young Master, this is clearly stalking. If anyone sees this...”

“Hurry up, Sir. Ariel is moving.”

Without waiting for Shane to finish his sentence, Carl began walking.

Shane felt a headache coming on as he hurried after Carl.

The grand duke’s son from the North was following an elf girl around!

If this were to be known among the other nobles, not only would Karl's reputation be ruined, but the Castarck family's name would also be dragged through the mud.

It would surely become a source of ridicule.

'Please, let us not be caught...'

Shane prayed earnestly. Since things had already come this far, not being discovered was the best outcome.

"Oh... what is he going to do this time?"

Whether he knew Shane's concerns or not, Karl continued to chase after Ariel with enthusiasm.

He looked every bit like a boy in love, causing Shane to let out a resigned smile.

Even if he was the grand duke's son, Carl was still just a young boy.

'Maybe it's not all bad...'

Shane thought as he watched Carl's back.

Carl had always been too harsh on himself.

Well, it was understandable.

Being the focus of the North's expectations, he probably wanted to live up to them.

Watching Carl train and study with a relentless intensity had always left Shane feeling somewhat bitter.

At an age when he should have been out playing, Carl had pushed himself too hard.

But seeing this boyish side of Carl now made Shane feel a little relieved.

'Maybe it's okay, just a little...'

Shane thought as he crouched down beside Karl.

Ariel and Selly had already moved on to another place to play.

“Ariel is trying to catch a goldfish, Sir Shane.”

Carl said in a slightly excited voice.

“But with a net that thin... Ah, it’s torn. Sir Shane, Ariel missed the goldfish.”

“That’s a shame. We should try it ourselves a bit later.”

“I feel like I could catch one.”

“Good confidence. If you do catch one, give it to that elf girl as a gift.”

“Well, I mean... there’s no need to do that...”

Seeing Carl blush so quickly, Shane smiled warmly.

Before they knew it, the sun was setting.

Even Selly, who had been dragging Ariel around cheerfully, was starting to look tired.

“Ariel, how was today? It was fun, right?”

When Selly asked, Ariel nodded.

She was a little tired, but thanks to Selly dragging her around, she had quite enjoyed herself.

Ariel quietly took something out of her inventory.

It was the lizardman leather wallet she had won earlier in the arm-wrestling match.

She handed it to Selly.

Selly received the lizardman leather wallet with wide eyes.

“Is this for me?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Didn’t you want it?”

“Not really...”

Ariel knew exactly how she had won against the arm-wrestling man.

With her infinite strength stat, winning was inevitable.

It was certainly not a fair competition, so she felt she couldn’t accept anything like the prime-grade minotaur meat or the cash box.

She originally hadn’t planned to accept anything, but since the man had so cleanly admitted his defeat, she had no choice.

With so many eyes watching, she decided to take the cheapest option—the lizardman leather wallet.

But Ariel, who had an inventory, didn’t need a wallet.

“Thank you.”

Selly gently stroked the lizardman leather wallet as if it were precious.

The smooth, slightly creepy texture of the lizardman skin was a bit unsettling, but thinking of it as a gift from Ariel made it seem like a treasured item.

After all, it was an item filled with memories.

“Really, thank you, Ariel.”

Selly gazed quietly at Ariel. She didn’t want to part with Ariel just yet.

But the sun had already set, and Selly had other things to do.

She needed to attend a banquet.

Tonight, a banquet hosted by the mayor was being held in Sierra.

All the high-ranking noble families currently staying in Sierra were invited.

Families such as the Castarck of the North or the Baraton of the West—all the powerful houses of the empire would attend.

Selly's Matiel family, being a high-ranking noble family, had naturally received an invitation. If she didn't go, her father would be very angry.

"Ah."

Then Selly had a good idea.

"Ariel, would you like to come with me to the banquet? There will be lots of delicious food! Do you remember the strawberry tart from Delight earlier? I can't guarantee it'll be the same, but there might be cakes just as good! And tons of other desserts! Ariel, come to the banquet with me. Please!"

Ariel thought for a moment.

Going to the banquet was one thing, but she felt she should return to her lodgings first. Ghost and Lu might be waiting.

When she said so, Selly smiled brightly.

"Then shall I come along? I'd love to meet Ghost and Lu sometime."

Chapter 21 : Banquet (1)

“Ugh, I feel like I’m going to die...”

Lu woke up after noon, suffering from a hangover, and looked around.

“Sis...?”

Ariel was nowhere to be seen.

Her pajamas were strewn across the bed, and the clothes she usually hung on the wall for outings were gone.

“Where did she go...?”

Lu grabbed a handful of healing powder and stuffed it into his mouth before heading out to the courtyard of their lodging.

Ariel wasn’t in the courtyard either.

Only Ghost was lying there, leisurely basking in the sun.

“Ghost, it looks like Sis went out. She probably went to buy that strawberry tart she had her eye on yesterday.”

Lu plopped down next to Ghost.

“Honestly, Sis is still such a kid. She loves sweet desserts... Oh well, I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

But even after several hours, Ariel hadn’t returned.

Lu started to get anxious.

“Could something have happened to her? Then again, Sis is incredibly strong... She’s probably just fallen asleep after eating

dessert. Still, it's way too late..."

Lu hesitated, wondering if he should go look for Ariel with Ghost.

It would be dangerous for a fairy to go alone, but if Ghost was with him, there'd be no risk of being kidnapped by humans.

"Hmm..."

But would it be okay to take Ghost out without Ariel?

Honestly, Lu wasn't confident he could control Ghost the way Ariel could.

If Ghost went on a rampage and started attacking people, things could get serious.

In the end, he couldn't decide what to do as the sun began to set.

"Could it be that Sis abandoned us...? No, that's impossible. But then again, maybe she doesn't really need us..."

While Lu was growing increasingly restless, Ghost remained calm.

Before Ariel left, she had told Ghost she would return.

Ghost believed her.

There was no reason to be worried at all.

"Did I do something wrong to Sis? Did she get mad because I drank too much? Or maybe she found a fairy cuter than me... No, that's impossible... Ah, I can't take this! Ghost, let's go find Sis right now!"

Lu climbed onto Ghost's head as he shouted, but Ghost didn't budge.

Ghost's face bore an expression of mild annoyance.

Ariel said she'd come back, so why was this fairy making such a fuss?

"Ghost! Come on, let's go!"

Lu tapped Ghost's forehead.

In response, Ghost shook his head, tossing Lu off.

“It’s dangerous for me to go alone! Ghost, you have to come with me...”

Just then, the door to the lodging opened, and Ariel returned.

“Ah, this is nice.”

Ariel’s lodging was even nicer than Selly had imagined.

It was just as good as the one her family had rented for themselves.

Noticing the merchant guild’s emblem at the entrance, it seemed likely that the guild had provided the lodging.

“Ariel, do you have some connection with the merchant guild? This place seems like it’s reserved only for VIPs.”

At Selly’s question, Ariel gave a small nod and opened the door to the lodging.

“Sis!”

With a loud shout, a small object zoomed through the air at high speed.

“I was so worried! I thought something might have happened to you! But I never thought for a moment that you abandoned us! Not even for a second!”

Selly’s eyes widened as she watched the tiny creature rub itself against Ariel’s cheek.

“A fairy...?”

It was a finger-sized being with wings on its back.

She’d read about fairies in books, but this was her first time seeing one in real life.

“I never once had impure thoughts like that. I believed in you, Sis!”

With Lu clinging to her face, Ariel quietly walked into the courtyard.

Selly followed, only to find a giant silver creature there.

It was a massive wolf.

“Eek!”

Selly let out a startled cry and stepped back.

She’d seen wolves before, but never one this enormous.

“Even its fur is silver... All the wolves I’ve seen were black...”

The giant silver wolf wagged its tail and approached Ariel, licking her face affectionately.

“I’m back, Ghost.”

Ariel stood on tiptoe and gently stroked Ghost’s chin.

“So, Ghost and Lu were these two...”

Selly quietly nodded in understanding.

She had assumed Ghost and Lu were humans or elves like Ariel.

Never had she imagined they would be a fairy and a wolf.

“Hmm, but who is this human child, Sis?”

Lu flew up and folded his arms, looking down at Selly with a haughty gaze.

“Where did you pick her up?”

“Picked up...?”

Selly was taken aback.

If the knights of the Matiel family found out she’d been treated like this, they’d rip Lu’s head off in an instant.

After all, Selly was still a noble of fairly high rank.

Not that Lu would know that.

“I’m Ariel’s friend.”

At Selly’s response, Lu raised an eyebrow.

“Friend?”

“Yeah. We’ve been playing together all day.”

“Really, Sis?”

Lu turned to Ariel, who gave a nod.

“I see. Well, there’s nothing wrong with being friends with a human, but still, you never know. You should be careful. Humans, as we learned in Herrington Village, are...”

“You’re Lu!”

Selly suddenly reached out and grabbed Lu.

“This is amazing. It’s my first time seeing a fairy. I always wanted to raise one when I was little.”

“Let go! Do you want to go to sleep forever?”

Lu wriggled in Selly’s hand.

Selly, mimicking what Lu had done earlier with Ariel, rubbed him against her cheek.

“So small. So cute. I really want to keep you.”

Lu stopped struggling.

His face showed a hint of embarrassment.

“Hmph, don’t get too attached. I’m sworn to serve Sis until the day I die... Ah, don’t grab my wings!”

After playing with Lu for a while, Selly gathered her courage and approached Ghost.

Ghost's silver fur shimmered under the moonlight, making him look mysterious.

Selly wanted to pet him.

But when she reached out her hand, Ghost bared his teeth and growled.

"Eek!"

Selly flinched and quickly withdrew.

"He doesn't like being touched?"

"Of course not. Ghost's prickly, unlike me," Lu said, sitting atop Selly's head.

"He wouldn't let a stranger touch him. Only Sis or I could get away with that."

Just then, Ariel gently stroked Ghost's chin again to calm him down.

"It's okay."

That was all she said, but Ghost immediately stopped growling and wagged his tail.

Selly, summoning her courage again, softly petted Ghost's front leg.

"Wow..."

Ghost's fur was unbelievably soft.

It was so fluffy that Selly thought it would make the perfect pillow for sleeping.

Ghost seemed to no longer be wary of Selly and even lay down, letting her pet his head and chin. With Ariel's help, she even managed to climb onto Ghost's back for a bit.

It was a blissful time for Selly.

“Oh!”

Selly glanced at the clock hanging on the wall and gasped in surprise.

“Ariel, we need to go to the banquet!”

It was already past the time when the banquet had begun.

They were late.

Ariel and Selly hurried out of the lodging and made their way to the banquet hall.

They had no choice but to leave Ghost and Lu behind.

After all, they couldn't bring a wolf and a fairy to an event where high-ranking nobles gathered.

Ariel wouldn't normally be allowed in either, but if she went with Selly, she might be able to slip in as a servant.

When they arrived at the entrance to the banquet hall, a woman with purple hair quickly approached them.

“Lady Selly! Where have you been all day?”

The woman, holding a large staff, glared at Selly with a very stern expression.

“What would you have done if something dangerous happened while you were wandering around alone?”

The woman's name was Pamela.

She was a mage in the service of the Matiel family and Selly's personal bodyguard.

Pamela was a skilled mage, talented enough to serve in the royal court.

However, she had once received a great favor from the Matiel family,

and out of gratitude, she now devoted herself to looking after Selly.

“I just wanted to explore the city.”

“If that’s the case, you should’ve taken me with you!”

“I didn’t see you anywhere, though.”

“Don’t lie. You snuck off while I was having my meal...!”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry, Pamela. Let’s just go inside. We’re late.”

Selly smiled as she grabbed Pamela’s hand and pulled her toward the entrance, and Pamela sighed deeply.

“Haah...”

Though Selly tried to brush it off as usual, Pamela had been worrying all day, feeling like she was on the verge of a heart attack.

“Please never do that again. If something happens to you, I’ll be...”

“Alright, I promise I won’t do it again. I’m sorry.”

“It’s a promise.”

“Yeah.”

Pamela decided to leave it at that, even though she knew the promise would likely be broken.

There was no point in pressing the issue further.

For now, she was just grateful Selly had returned safely.

She would just have to keep a closer eye on her in the future.

“By the way, who is this...?”

Pamela glanced at Ariel with a hint of suspicion. Judging by her pointed ears, Ariel was clearly an elf.

“A friend.”

“A friend...?”

“Yep. We became friends today, and she’s going to the banquet with me.”

Selly smiled, taking both Pamela and Ariel by the hand, and led them into the banquet hall.

The banquet had already started.

The grand hall was lavishly decorated, filled with nobles, and the mayor was giving a speech from the podium.

Selly sat down at a corner table with Ariel and Pamela and waited for the speech to end.

The content of the speech wasn’t anything special.

Just the usual: thanking everyone for visiting Sierra, expressing gratitude for attending the banquet, and hoping for continued support for the empire.

Stifling a yawn, Selly scanned the food tables on the side of the hall.

As expected of a high-ranking nobles’ banquet, the food looked absolutely delicious.

“That concludes my speech. I hope you all have a pleasant evening.”

Applause followed the mayor’s closing remarks.

Music started playing in the center of the hall, and people began to rise from their tables and head toward the food.

“Let’s go, Ariel!”

Selly stood up with Ariel.

At that moment, someone approached them.

“Hey, Selly, long time no see~ I knew I’d run into you here.”

The boy had a bowl-cut of blonde hair, protruding cheekbones, and

buck teeth, giving him a somewhat sly look.

Selly's face darkened immediately upon seeing him.

Chapter 22 : Banquet (2)

The boy who greeted Selly was named Cobin.

He was the second son of the Baraton family.

“Get lost, Cobin. Don’t talk to me.”

Selly spat out coldly, clearly showing her disgust toward Cobin.

In fact, most of the nobles attending the banquet felt the same way.

Everyone disliked Cobin.

It was because of his usual behavior.

Cobin had pulled many pranks during banquets, such as tripping passing servants or humiliating young noblewomen by intentionally dancing foolishly with them. His actions were always unpleasant, making others frown.

Despite being avoided by the nobles, Cobin continued to receive invitations to banquets, thanks to his family.

The Baraton family owned the gold-rich mountain range, making them one of the wealthiest families in the empire.

Just as the Castracks were considered the rulers of the North, the Baratons were regarded as the rulers of the West.

As the second son of such an influential family, Cobin’s rude behavior was tolerated, no matter how inappropriate.

“Haha, Selly, don’t be so harsh. Are you still mad about that thing from before?”

Cobin flashed a sly smile, revealing his buck teeth, making him look

even more vile.

“That was just a joke!”

“Shut up.”

Unlike the sly Cobin, Selly was seething inside.

A few months ago, Cobin had spread a ridiculous rumor at a banquet in the imperial capital.

The rumor was that Selly had made a romantic proposal to Cobin.

And that Cobin had accepted it, with their marriage being promised for the future.

For Selly, this was beyond absurd.

She had no interest in romance, and especially not with someone like Cobin, who had a sly face and a nasty personality.

Though Cobin later admitted it was just a joke, the incident still left a sour taste for Selly.

“Still, it wouldn’t be so bad to become my wife. You’d live your life buried in gold, rich beyond your dreams. How about it? Why not go ahead and get engaged with me?”

“I’m not interested. Don’t talk to me. If you say another word, I’ll slap you.”

“Haha, you’re as bold as ever. That’s what I like. All the women from the Martiel family are like...”

“Let’s go, Ariel.”

Ignoring Cobin, Selly walked with Ariel toward the food table.

Dealing with Cobin was a waste of time.

“Oh! An elf! Is she your slave, Selly? She’s quite a looker!”

Cobin then turned his attention to Ariel.

“Hello, elf. I’m Cobin of the Baraton family. Even an elf must know about the Baraton family, right? If you make a good impression on me now...”

“Ariel, ignore him. He’s not worth our time.”

“Okay.”

Ariel had no interest in Cobin whatsoever.

Her attention was entirely on the food laid out at the banquet.

What caught her eye was a tall cake, drizzled with flowing chocolate.

“Ariel! Look over there!”

Selly pointed excitedly at the same chocolate cake.

“Let’s start with that one!”

“Okay.”

With bright faces, the two of them headed toward the chocolate cake.

‘...How insolent.’

Watching Selly and Ariel walk toward the cake, Cobin frowned.

He could understand Selly’s attitude toward him since the Martiel family wasn’t to be trifled with.

But for this elf, whom he had just met, to ignore him was infuriating.

In the West, elves were nothing more than slaves.

No matter how rare they were, their status was low.

To Cobin, they were no different from servants.

Cobin gestured to a passing servant and received a cup of milk.

‘I need to teach this elf girl the dignity of nobility.’

Holding the milk, Cobin approached Ariel with a plan.

He intended to pretend to bump into her and spill the milk all over her face.

It was a trick Cobin had used many times before.

At that moment, Ariel was carrying a plate with a slice of chocolate cake, walking toward the table with Selly.

“Oops~!”

Cobin aimed his shoulder to bump into Ariel.

Or so he tried.

But nothing hit his shoulder.

Even though Ariel was right in front of him, she disappeared the moment their shoulders were supposed to collide.

Cobin lost his balance and staggered, eventually falling to the ground in a ridiculous manner, completely drenching himself in the milk he had been holding.

“Puahaha!”

Selly’s laughter rang out.

“Cobin, maybe you should learn how to walk before you talk about getting engaged.”

Laughter erupted from all around. Everyone was laughing at Cobin.

Given his usual bad behavior, people were thoroughly enjoying the spectacle.

Gritting his teeth, Cobin stood up.

Snatching a handkerchief from a nearby servant, he wiped the milk from his face and glared at Ariel.

Ariel, however, was already sitting at a table, calmly eating her

chocolate cake.

‘What just happened?’

Cobin couldn’t understand it.

Just before their shoulders were about to collide, Ariel had clearly been in his line of sight.

But she had vanished in an instant.

Cobin didn’t know what trick she had pulled, but he wasn’t going to let it go.

“Hey, give me that!”

Cobin grabbed another cup of milk from a passing servant and stormed toward Ariel.

His plan had changed.

He was now going to pour the milk directly onto Ariel’s head.

Selly would be furious, but so what?

Cobin planned to claim that Ariel had tripped him, and that he was simply punishing her for it.

Back at his family estate, he often punished servants in this way when they made mistakes.

The sight of a servant drenched in milk, on the verge of tears, was always entertaining.

“You arrogant little elf.”

Cobin stood in front of Ariel and spoke in a threatening tone.

“You made me fall, so now you’re going to get what you deserve.”

He lifted the cup of milk above Ariel’s head.

Ariel, still chewing on her cake, didn’t move.

“Cobin, what are you doing...?”

Selly started to speak, but—

Thud!

A fist suddenly flew in from the side, striking Cobin and sending him crashing to the ground once again, soaked in the milk he had been holding.

“Ugh... Who did that?”

Cobin wiped the blood from his mouth and looked up.

Now, it wasn't just about the spilled milk. This was a serious matter.

No one could get away with striking a noble.

“Who dares...?”

Cobin's eyes locked onto an unexpected figure.

It was none other than Carl Castrack.

The Grand Duke of the North stood there, glaring down at Cobin with cold eyes.

Carl had been quietly watching Ariel throughout the banquet, but when he saw Cobin trying to pour milk on her, he lost control and reacted instinctively.

“How dare you lay a hand on our young master!”

A knight, standing at the edge of the banquet hall, rushed forward.

It was Cobin's bodyguard.

“No matter how high the Castrack family stands, this is unacceptable!” the bodyguard shouted, drawing his massive spear.

This was Marcus, the famous spear knight.

There was hardly anyone in the empire who didn't know his name.

Marcus had once wielded his great spear with unparalleled skill during the battles against the barbarians, carving a path through enemy lines.

It was said that whenever he swung his spear, four or five barbarian warriors would lose their heads simultaneously.

During the war, Marcus had been as feared by the barbarians as Carl himself.

Because of his accomplishments, Marcus had been made the commander of the Baraton family's knights, the wealthiest family in the empire.

"To dare draw a weapon against the heir of the North..."

A chilling voice spoke from behind Carl.

"Are you prepared to face the consequences of that action, Marcus?"

It was Shane, Carl's own bodyguard.

Chapter 23 : Banquet (3)

The banquet fell silent immediately.

The music stopped, and people stood frozen, staring at Shane and Marcus.

Shane, the strongest swordsman in the North, and Marcus, the strongest warrior in the West.

The fact that these two were about to fight was a spectacle no one could pay for.

“Shane will win anyway.”

“No, Marcus is a step ahead.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen Shane’s swordsmanship.”

“Care to make a bet?”

“Sure.”

The crowd whispered with interest, and the atmosphere grew more intense.

“Shane, I’ve been wanting to test my strength against you, and now the opportunity has come.”

“Likewise, Marcus. I’ve been eagerly waiting for this day.”

“Will you still say that when your heart is pierced by my spear?”

“Before that, your head will be flying off.”

“Come at me, Shane.”

“No, you come at me, Marcus.”

Despite their words, neither of them took a single step.

Both had the same thought in mind:

‘Whoever moves first will lose!’

Marcus and Shane knew very well what was at stake.

If they swung their weapons here, they’d be severely punished.

Both were brave knights who loved combat, but they knew how to choose the right time and place.

This was a banquet attended by high-ranking nobles.

Causing a ruckus here would result in harsh punishment, and if any noble were to get hurt, they might even face execution.

Imperial law was not to be taken lightly.

In that sense, Marcus drawing his spear was just for show.

He couldn’t do nothing after Cobin was struck, so pulling out his spear was the minimum action to save face for his house.

The same went for Shane, who guarded his sword. Now all that was left was for someone to step in and stop them.

Then the two could retreat with something like “I’ll let you off this time,” or “Consider yourself lucky,” and everything would end smoothly.

Pamela, the bodyguard of Selly, stepped up to play the role of peacemaker.

“Both of you, stop it. This is a sacred banquet. Are you out of your minds, drawing weapons in a place like this?”

Pamela, a seasoned mage, had already figured out their intentions.

“What if someone gets hurt? Please, stop here.”

With Pamela's soulless plea, Shane and Marcus reluctantly lowered their weapons.

Shane glanced at Carl, and Marcus at Cobin, signaling that they had done enough and the decision was now up to them.

"...Stop it, Sir Shane. This is a rare banquet, so I'll overlook Sir Marcus drawing his spear this time."

"Understood."

At Carl's words, Shane sheathed his sword and backed down.

Now it was Cobin's turn.

"Who said you can stop!"

Cobin shouted, trembling with anger.

"I got hit! Sir Marcus, pierce that Northerner with your spear! Rip his head off! Or you're fired!"

From Cobin's perspective, he had a right to be upset.

He was the one who had been hit, but the adults around him were trying to sweep it under the rug as if nothing had happened.

Eventually, Carl stepped forward to address him calmly.

"Cobin, let's end it here. I apologize for hitting you. If you want, you can hit me in return."

"No? I don't want to! Hitting you isn't enough!"

Cobin reached out and pointed at Ariel.

"Unless that elf girl gets hit instead!"

The crowd murmured in disapproval at Cobin's behavior.

"Is he really going to hit an elf girl...?"

"She's so cute..."

“He’s truly a devil...”

Despite the reactions, Cobin didn’t back down.

“What do you say, elf girl? Take responsibility for what happened! If you don’t want to get hit, then you can duel me! Yeah, let’s have a duel instead!”

Cobin shouted loudly.

‘A duel sounds better,’ Cobin thought.

Hitting her once would only be a brief satisfaction, but if it was a duel, he could beat her until she was a bloody mess.

‘Hehe, this will be fun.’

Rumor had it that Carl Karstark had once proposed to an elf and was rejected. Or was it a marriage proposal?

Among nobles, these kinds of rumors were often baseless, but judging by Carl’s behavior now, this one seemed to be true.

When Cobin tried to pour milk on Ariel’s head earlier, Carl had run over and punched him.

For someone who usually carried himself with the weight of a Northern heir, Carl’s actions were impulsive.

If the rumor was true, then the elf in question had to be Ariel.

How satisfying would it be to beat Ariel to a pulp in a duel, and make Carl suffer while watching it?

Punishing the arrogant elf and humiliating the annoying Carl—of course, a duel was the better option, Cobin decided.

Imagining Carl’s twisted expression, Cobin smirked wickedly.

“If that elf girl accepts the duel, I’ll forget about Carl Karstark hitting me!”

Cobin declared.

“But if she doesn’t, I won’t let this go!”

Now, all eyes turned to Ariel.

“...You’re despicable, Cobin. Do you really want to spill blood?”

Carl growled.

“You want to duel that fragile child...?”

At that moment, Shane approached Carl and whispered to him.

“She’ll probably be fine. Didn’t you see earlier?”

He was referring to the arm wrestling match Ariel had participated in earlier in the day.

Ariel had easily overpowered a hulking man with pure strength.

Given that, even Carl wasn’t sure he could beat Ariel in a fair fight.

Sure, Cobin might have had some sword training due to his noble status, but it was probably half-hearted at best.

“I think it’s best to trust that elf girl this time, my lord.”

“Hmm... Fine. Cobin is pathetic anyway... But if Ariel is in danger, I won’t stand by and do nothing.”

“Neither will I.”

Carl agreed.

He decided to trust Ariel’s strength, which had been evident during the arm wrestling match earlier.

For the same reason, Selly also approved.

“Ariel, be careful. If things get dangerous, I’ll help you immediately.”

Ariel, who had been quietly enjoying her chocolate cake, stood up and walked toward Cobin.

She had decided to accept Cobin's duel.

She didn't really know or care what Cobin's true intentions were, but she had a general sense of what kind of person he was.

Cobin was a spoiled brat who picked fights for no reason.

Normally, Ariel would have ignored someone like him, but not today.

Cobin had gone too far.

Ariel was well aware that Cobin had deliberately tried to bump into her earlier.

When she avoided him, he tripped on his own and embarrassed himself, and now he was throwing a tantrum to take it out on her.

It was classic brat behavior.

As Ariel stood in front of him, Cobin sneered cruelly.

'Hehe. I'll smash that pretty face of yours.'

Neither Cobin nor Ariel had weapons, so the duel would be a bare-handed fight.

There were no formal rules for a duel.

When nobles or knights declared it to be a duel, that was all that was needed.

"Shall we begin?"

Cobin said, taking a stance.

Back at home, Cobin had hated sword training more than anything.

Even with a wooden sword, it was too heavy for him to swing properly.

For that reason, the only thing he'd put any effort into was martial arts.

Martial arts, the art of striking an opponent with bare hands!

Cobin's philosophy was that if one trained hard enough, one could kill an opponent with their bare hands.

In truth, that was the case. Using weapons was just more efficient.

'Finally, I can put my skills to use...'

In fact, Cobin had secretly been practicing an ancient martial art he discovered in the family library.

It was called "Praying Mantis Fist."

Inspired by the movements of a mantis, it focused on rapid, relentless attacks to overwhelm the opponent before they could react.

When Cobin crouched and raised his hands like claws, he really did resemble a mantis.

"Pfft, what's with that ridiculous pose?"

"Ugh, so lame!"

People snickered at Cobin's stance, but he ignored them.

'They'll be surprised soon enough!'

He had tested his Praying Mantis Fist on several servants, and they had all been in pain afterward!

"Praying Mantis Strike!"

Cobin lunged at Ariel, swinging his clawed hand sharply.

His target was Ariel's neck.

When the servants had been hit in the neck with his Praying Mantis Strike, they had been unable to breathe for a while.

'Its power is proven!'

Smack!

Cobin's Praying Mantis Strike landed on Ariel.

And a scream immediately followed.

"Aaaargh!!"

It was Cobin who screamed.

"What's going on? He broke his own hand."

"I knew it from the moment I saw those weird moves."

"Tsk, ts. Pathetic, especially against a girl..."

"Can't even throw a proper punch?"

The crowd murmured again, as the duel had ended too quickly.

Cobin had attacked Ariel with a strange movement, and his hand had bent in the wrong direction.

"Aaaaah! My hand! My haaand!!"

Cobin cried out, drooling, while Ariel just stood there, unfazed.

"Ma-Marcus! Help me! This wretched elf broke my hand!"

At Cobin's desperate cry, Marcus sighed.

His face showed a desire to punch Cobin himself.

'I told him not to mess around with that ridiculous Praying Mantis Fist...

Chapter 24 : Banquet (4)

Thwack!

A heavy sound echoed.

It was the sound of Ariel's hand striking Cobin's face.

Cobin flew straight into the wall, then crumpled to the floor.

He didn't move after that.

The banquet hall fell into a deep silence.

People blinked, unable to utter a word.

In their minds, they were wondering, "Is it physically possible for a human to fly straight like that?"

The first to move was Cobin's bodyguard, Marcus.

After all, the only one who could take care of Cobin here was Marcus.

Marcus approached Cobin.

'What in the world...?'

Cobin's condition was severe.

His eyes had rolled back, and foam was dribbling from his mouth.

His arms and legs were twisted in unnatural directions, resembling a crumpled insect.

Yet, he was still breathing, albeit faintly, so at least he wasn't dead.

The wall where Cobin had hit was dented, and the floor was littered

with Cobin's teeth, including his buck teeth.

'She just swung her hand, and this happened?'

Marcus found it hard to believe.

From what he could tell, Ariel hadn't used any magic.

She had simply reacted reflexively to Cobin's sudden attack by swinging her hand.

And yet, Cobin was now on the verge of death.

Judging by the dent in the wall, Cobin's entire body must have been shattered.

He might never fully recover.

'Well, it's his own fault...'

Clicking his tongue, Marcus hoisted Cobin onto his shoulder.

After all, Cobin had been the one to propose the duel, and the ambush had also been his doing. Ariel had merely reacted.

So there was only one thing left for Marcus to do.

Take the unconscious Cobin away for treatment.

The banquet had already been dull for Marcus, so he left the hall without hesitation, carrying Cobin.

"Sir Shane... what kind of training has Ariel undergone?"

"I... don't know. In all my life, I've never seen anything like this. Her strength is like that of an ogre."

"Calling a lady an ogre is a bit much, don't you think?"

"She might even be stronger than an ogre. It's hard to believe, given her small frame."

Carl and Shane were sitting in one corner of the banquet hall, talking.

They were discussing the duel between Ariel and Cobin from earlier.

‘Can that even be called a duel? It was too one-sided...’

Carl thought to himself as he glanced at Ariel, who was seated far away.

Ariel, having defeated Cobin, had returned to her seat and was once again eating her chocolate cake, looking as calm as ever.

After Marcus left with Cobin, the banquet had resumed, and people were beginning to take an interest in Ariel.

“Hey, your name is Ariel, right? You’re really strong.”

“It’s no wonder Lord Carl proposed to her. People from the North do like strong women.”

“I heard about that too. But it wasn’t just a proposal—it was a marriage proposal, right? Though she rejected him...”

“Ariel, why did you reject Lord Carl? He’s quite a catch...”

Even as she was surrounded by noble ladies asking her questions, Ariel quietly continued eating her cake.

Her face was expressionless, making it impossible to tell what she was thinking.

“Come on, ladies, I appreciate your interest, but let’s give Ariel some space. She must be tired after her duel with Cobin.”

Selly stepped in to protect Ariel, gently ushering the noble ladies away.

‘She does look a bit tired...’

Carl sipped his drink, observing Ariel closely.

At some point, Ariel’s eyes had grown half-closed, and her pace of eating cake was slowing.

Finally, she closed her eyes completely and let her fork slip from her

hand.

“Huh? Ariel, are you okay?”

Selly gently shook Ariel’s shoulder. Ariel stirred slightly, but her eyes were unfocused.

“Ariel, would you like to step outside for some fresh air?”

“Okay.”

With that, Selly and Ariel walked out onto the banquet hall’s terrace.

“Sir Shane.”

Carl spoke in a somewhat determined voice.

“I don’t think I can wait any longer.”

“Wait for what, my lord?”

“By dawn tomorrow, I’ll be leaving this city. And that means I’ll be parting ways with Ariel.”

“Parting...”

Shane looked puzzled.

Was this really the right word for the situation? He wasn’t sure.

“So, I’ve decided I must tell her how I feel now.”

Shane’s eyes widened in surprise at Carl’s words.

“T-Tell her...?”

“I’m going to confess.”

“My lord... that’s...”

“I’m not expecting anything. I just want her to know how I feel, even if she doesn’t accept it.”

Seeing Carl's resolute expression, Shane realized there was no stopping him.

Shane himself had been in Carl's shoes once, and he knew that in such moments, no one could change a young man's mind.

"Very well, my lord."

All Shane could do was hope that Carl wouldn't be too heartbroken.

"Then, I'll be off."

Carl stood and began walking steadily toward the terrace.

"Haha, this is quite something..."

Shane chuckled as he watched Carl's retreating figure.

Carl, who always tried to appear mature, still seemed like a child to Shane's eyes.

But right now, Carl looked like he had grown up a bit.

Outside on the terrace, Selly and Ariel leaned against the railing, gazing up at the night sky.

Tonight, there were more stars than usual.

"Ariel, you should visit our estate sometime. We don't have sweets like this since fattening food is forbidden, but we do have a huge garden. You could play there with Ghost and Ludo."

"Okay."

"And if we're lucky enough to get permission from my father, we could visit the nearby city too. I'm sure they have a Delight shop there, so maybe we could have some strawberry tarts. And..."

Selly chattered on endlessly.

She had to leave Sierra for the capital at dawn, so she didn't have much time left to spend with Ariel.

“It’s a shame... If it weren’t for the princess’s birthday party, I would stay here longer to spend more time with you. There’s still so much we haven’t done yet...”

Just then, footsteps approached from behind.

Selly turned to see a handsome boy with black hair walking toward them.

It was Carl.

“Selly, it’s been a while.”

Selly had met Carl a few times before, though they weren’t particularly close.

“Lord Carl, is something the matter?”

“Uh, well, could you give us a moment? I’d like to talk to Ariel.”

Seeing Carl’s hesitant expression, Selly almost burst out laughing.

The usually composed Northern Duke, who always acted so dignified in front of Princess Iliana, now looked like a boy smitten with his first crush.

He looked so cute that she wanted to tease him, but she decided to give him some space.

“Ariel, I’ll head inside. Lord Carl, please feel free to talk.”

“Thank you.”

Once Selly left, Carl took a deep breath and called out to Ariel.

“Ahem, Ariel.”

Ariel slowly turned her gaze away from the night sky.

Her sleepy-looking red eyes stared blankly at Carl.

Her indifferent gaze made Carl hesitate, but he steadied himself and pulled something out of his pocket.

“Here...”

What Carl held was a ring.

It was a ring with the Karstark family crest engraved on it.

“This is for you...”

Carl slipped the ring onto Ariel’s finger, and Ariel stared at it curiously.

If it had been any other noble lady, they would have immediately understood Carl’s intention.

After all, a man giving a woman his family’s crest ring symbolized an engagement.

“If you wear this ring... you’ll be treated with great respect anywhere in the North...”

Carl mumbled awkwardly and bit his lip.

This wasn’t what he had prepared to say. He had planned something much more confident and eloquent.

But standing in front of Ariel, his mind had gone completely blank.

“So many stars tonight.”

Carl glanced up at the sky.

Since the moment he put the ring on her finger, he couldn’t find the courage to meet Ariel’s gaze.

If their eyes met, he felt like his heart would explode.

“Anyway, Ariel, I’m leaving for the capital at dawn tomorrow. So, um, thanks for accepting the ring... And someday, I hope you’ll visit the North. It’s cold, but the scenery is beautiful...”

Carl rambled.

Even he didn’t know what he was saying anymore.

He had other things in mind, but his mouth was speaking on its own.

Realizing this wouldn't do, Carl gathered his resolve and turned to face Ariel.

"So, Ariel..."

Just as he started to speak, there was a soft thud, and Ariel collapsed to the ground.

"Ariel...?"

Carl quickly knelt beside her to check her condition.

He hesitated to touch her, but he had no choice now.

She had collapsed so suddenly; it might be an emergency.

He brought his hand close to her nose to check if she was breathing.

Thankfully, she was breathing normally, calmly and steadily. But she was unconscious.

Carl had been taught by Shane how to handle such situations.

'Do I... need to do mouth-to-mouth?'

Carl's face flushed bright red.

But he quickly shook his head, clearing the thought.

If someone collapsed and didn't get help in time, it could be too late. There was no time to hesitate.

"Here goes!"

Carl closed his eyes and leaned in.

He felt a cool, soft sensation against his
lips.

Without thinking, Carl opened his eyes.

“!”

His heart skipped a beat.

Ariel was awake and staring directly at him.

What Carl's lips had touched wasn't Ariel's lips, but her hand.

Ariel had raised her hand to block his mouth.

It was a situation that could easily be misunderstood.

“A-Ariel, this is...!”

Carl scrambled to his feet in a panic, bumping into someone standing behind him.

Carl slowly turned around.

It was Selly.

“Lord Carl... what exactly were you trying to do...?”

Selly stared at Carl in disbelief.

Chapter 25 : Banquet (5)

“...Selly, I know exactly what you’re thinking right now,” Carl said, sweating nervously.

“But it’s a misunderstanding. I wasn’t trying to kiss Ariel.”

“But I saw it,” Selly insisted. “You were leaning in with your lips toward Ariel. If she hadn’t blocked you with her hand, you would have definitely...”

“Like I said, that wasn’t my intention. I was just trying to give her CPR. Ariel suddenly collapsed, and I thought it was serious...”

Selly glanced over at Ariel.

“Ariel was just asleep.”

“Asleep...?”

“Yes. Whenever Ariel eats something, she falls asleep almost immediately.”

Even now, Ariel had drifted back into sleep. Her breathing was steady, and her face peaceful. She was sleeping soundly, even on the cold terrace floor.

“Anyway, I believe you, Lord Carl. If it were someone like Corbin, I’d be suspicious. But I doubt the Duke of the North would try anything strange.”

“Thanks for believing me...”

Thankfully, Selly’s misunderstanding was cleared up quickly. That was a relief for Carl, but the atmosphere between them had already become awkward.

A heavy silence lingered between Carl and Selly for a while.

“Well then... see you later, Selly.”

In the end, Carl had no choice but to leave the terrace hurriedly, as if escaping.

“Young Master.”

As Carl returned to the banquet hall, Shane approached him with a pleased smile.

“Were you able to confess your feelings?”

“I wasn’t... something came up.”

“Did something happen?”

“Ariel suddenly fell asleep. It looks like I’ll have to confess another time.”

“Another time...”

Shane began to look a bit anxious.

“You’re not planning on staying in this city, are you? We’re supposed to leave for the capital at dawn.”

“I know, Sir Shane. I’m not that unreasonable. I have no intention of staying here.”

Carl gave a bitter smile.

“When I said ‘another time,’ I meant sometime in the distant future. It might take a long time, and I might never see Ariel again. If that happens, it means we weren’t meant to be.”

“Young Master...”

“But I have a feeling. I believe I’ll meet Ariel again. And when that day comes, I’ll make sure to tell her how I feel.”

Shane nodded quietly in response to Carl’s words.

Though Carl said this now, it was impossible to predict when or how his feelings might change.

Human emotions can shift in just a few days.

After a few days in the capital, meeting Princess Illiana, Carl might completely forget about Ariel.

‘Well, that might be for the best...’

From what Shane could tell, Ariel didn’t seem to have any romantic feelings for Carl. Even earlier, when she was eating cake, she hadn’t spared Carl a glance.

Even if Carl confessed his feelings, there was no guarantee Ariel would accept them. In fact, it seemed more likely she wouldn’t.

If that happened, Carl would be heartbroken. It would be better if things ended quietly here.

“Oh.”

Suddenly, Carl seemed to remember something.

“But I did give Ariel one thing.”

“What did you give her?”

“The Castarck family’s signet ring. I slipped it onto her finger myself.”

“!”

Shane’s face filled with shock.

“Y-young Master! That ring!”

The significance of the Castarck signet ring was profound.

When a man gave it to a woman, it symbolized an engagement. But that wasn’t all.

More importantly, it represented power.

If Ariel showed the Castarck signet ring in the North, the northern nobles would be obligated to follow her orders.

There was plenty of room for it to be misused.

‘Well... I doubt that elf girl would do something like that...’

Normally, the ring should have been given to Princess Illiana.

Regardless of Carl’s feelings for Ariel, he was ultimately expected to marry Princess Illiana to secure a friendly alliance between the royal family and the North.

Shane looked at Carl with a complex expression.

He had seemed to give up too easily earlier, but now it turned out he had given Ariel the Castarck signet ring.

If the Castark family found out, there would undoubtedly be chaos.

“Sir Shane, I don’t regret my decision,” Carl said confidently, unaware of Shane’s inner turmoil.

“My father told me to give that ring to the woman I love, just like he gave it to my mother.”

“Well... you did the right thing.”

“I’m looking forward to the day I see Ariel again.”

Carl gave a shy smile, while Shane’s eyes gleamed with determination.

‘No matter what, I have to get that ring back.’

The Castarck signet ring was extremely important.

There was no way it could be left in the hands of an elf girl Carl had met by chance in the forest.

That one ring held the future of both the royal family and the North.

Even if it meant taking it back by force, Shane was determined to

retrieve the ring from Ariel.

Of course, he would have to do it secretly before Carl found out and caused an uproar.

“It’s time to head back, Young Master. The banquet is almost over, and we need to leave early tomorrow. You should get some rest.”

“Yes, I suppose...”

With a lingering glance toward the terrace where Ariel was, Carl left the banquet hall with Shane.

As the banquet ended and the nobles started to depart, Selly shook Ariel’s shoulder to wake her up.

“Ariel, wake up. Let’s go.”

Ariel slowly opened her eyes and groggily stood up, still disoriented from sleeping on the floor.

“Good grief.”

Selly tidied Ariel’s messy hair and clothes, then walked her out of the banquet hall.

Following them, Selly’s bodyguard, Pamela, asked, “Miss, where is the elf girl going?”

“Ariel is staying at the merchants’ lodging. It’s not far from here. Let’s take her there.”

“Good idea. It’s late, and the elf girl looks like she can barely walk on her own.”

Ariel, still half-asleep, leaned heavily on Selly as they walked.

“Ariel, not that way. This way.”

As she guided the sleepy Ariel, Pamela smiled warmly.

Seeing Selly, who had always been the youngest in her family, taking care of someone else was a first.

‘She’s grown so much. She used to be so spoiled and always causing trouble... When did she become so mature?’

Lost in her thoughts, Pamela soon realized they had reached the lodging where Ariel was staying.

Just as Selly had said, it wasn’t far.

“Ariel, we’re here. This is your lodging.”

Ariel rubbed her eyes, looked at the building, and then turned to Selly.

“...Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. You must be tired, so hurry and get some rest...”

Selly’s voice became emotional.

“And make sure to visit our estate sometime... It’s the Martiel family in the East... Don’t forget... Sniff...”

Selly started sniffing.

Ariel nodded quietly.

“I understand.”

“Promise me, you have to visit! Sniff, sob...!”

“...”

Ariel reached out and patted Selly’s head.

It wasn’t clear what the gesture meant, but Pamela assumed it was meant to comfort her.

‘Though, it does seem a bit emotionless...’

Unlike the teary-eyed Selly, Ariel’s expression remained completely neutral.

'Is she just used to farewells? Or are all elves like this...? Or maybe Ariel just finds Selly a bit annoying...'

"Sniff, I'll treasure the lizardman leather wallet you gave me... And next time, we'll eat premium-grade minotaur steak together... And..."

Selly kept rambling, making it seem like this farewell would never end.

Starting to feel a bit exhausted, Pamela stepped in.

"Alright, alright~ You don't have to be so sad. It's not like you'll never see each other again. Let's head back for now, okay?"

"Sob, Ariel...!"

Selly gave Ariel a tight hug, and Ariel quietly patted Selly's back.

"This isn't working..."

Pamela finally hoisted Selly over her shoulder. If they delayed any longer, tomorrow would be unbearable.

"Well then, goodbye, elf girl. See you next time~"

Pamela swiftly carried Selly away.

"Ariel! You have to visit! Promise meee!"

Selly shouted tearfully from over Pamela's shoulder.

Ariel simply waved at the two as they left.

When Ariel returned to her lodging, she found Lu sprawled on the bed, fast asleep.

"Mmm..."

An empty wine bottle rolled on the floor, evidence that Lu had gotten thoroughly drunk again.

Ariel quietly covered Lu with a blanket and headed to the yard.

Ghost, who had been lying down, immediately got up and approached her.

“Ghost, I’m back.”

Ariel gently petted Ghost’s head.

His fur was still soft and fluffy.

If Ariel were to make gloves or a scarf from Ghost’s fur, it would undoubtedly be a high-quality product.

Oblivious to Ariel’s thoughts, Ghost wagged his tail happily.

“Should I just sleep here with you...”

Ariel murmured as she looked at Ghost.

She had had an exhausting day, spending the entire time with Selly and then attending the banquet at the end.

“I don’t feel like washing up.”

She just wanted to cuddle up with Ghost and fall asleep.

After a moment of hesitation, Ariel shook her head.

It was better to wash up. No matter how tired she was, sleeping without washing would affect the quality of her sleep.

And poor sleep could lead to mental fatigue, which couldn’t be easily fixed with stamina or defense,

like the feeling of drowsiness after eating.

“I’ll be right back.”

Ariel tapped Ghost’s nose before standing up.

Her lodging not only had a yard but also a private bathroom, so she didn’t need to go outside.

Moreover, the bathroom had hot water, which made it a very

comfortable place to stay.

Ariel threw off her clothes and headed to the bathroom, where the sound of running water soon echoed.

A while later...

‘...I’ve found it.’

Someone silently stepped into the yard of Ariel’s lodging.

A man, half his face covered by a mask.

It was Carl’s bodyguard knight, Shane.

Chapter 26 : Intruder (1)

Shhh.

Ariel, who was washing herself with hot water, suddenly tilted her head as she looked at her finger.

There was a ring on her finger.

It was the Castrack signet ring.

She had received it from Carl at the banquet, but Ariel, who had been half-asleep at the time, didn't remember.

Ariel stared blankly at the ring for a moment, then tilted her head once more and continued to wash herself.

The ring wasn't important right now.

She wanted to quickly finish her bath and cuddle Ghost to sleep.

After hastily finishing her bath, Ariel stepped out of the bathroom, dried herself with a towel, and changed into her pajamas.

She felt refreshed and invigorated.

She thought it had been a good idea to wash up.

Smiling softly, Ariel went out into the yard.

“?”

And then she paused.

Ghost, who should have been wagging his tail to greet her, was lying collapsed in the yard.

Ariel hurried toward Ghost, but just then, a voice came from behind her.

“Don’t worry about the wolf. It’s just asleep.”

Ariel turned around.

Someone had appeared behind her without her noticing.

It was a masked figure with a wooden sword at their waist.

Shane, who had broken into the yard of Ariel’s lodging, had first encountered Ghost.

“722...”

Ghost bared its teeth and glared at Shane, but didn’t charge recklessly.

It instinctively realized Shane’s strength.

Facing Ghost, Shane pulled a vial from his cloak.

It was a bottle containing fairy sleep powder.

Shane’s plan was to put both Ariel and Ghost to sleep and steal the Castrack signet ring.

Stealing wasn’t an honorable act for a knight, but there was no other option.

If Ariel returned the ring willingly, that would be fine, but if she refused, he would have to take it by force.

That could cause things to escalate.

Shane wanted to resolve this as quietly as possible. If Carl found out, it would be a disaster.

Whoosh!

Ghost leaped at Shane with a powerful kick off the ground.

It recognized Shane as an intruder.

No matter how strong the intruder appeared, Ghost had to deal with him before he could threaten Ariel.

Click!

Shane quickly stepped back, opening the vial of fairy sleep powder.

His goal was simply to retrieve the ring, not to harm Ghost.

Swoosh!

As Shane swung the vial in his hand, the sleep powder scattered over Ghost's face.

Fairy sleep powder was extremely potent and usually caused immediate sleep when it hit someone's face.

Ghost, momentarily dazed, stood still.

But that was all. Ghost didn't fall asleep.

Instead of falling asleep, it quickly regained its senses and charged at Shane once more.

"Is it truly a mystical creature?"

Shane had to roll roughly on the ground to avoid Ghost's attack.

It seemed that a few sprinkles of sleep powder wouldn't be enough to subdue Ghost.

Swoosh!

Shane kept dodging Ghost's attacks, scattering more sleep powder as he went.

Finally, as the last of the powder ran out, Ghost collapsed onto the ground.

Seeing the empty vial, Shane let out a sigh.

Now there was no way to put Ariel to sleep.

“Should I go back and get more sleep powder...?”

As Shane hesitated, he heard footsteps approaching from behind.

It was the sound of Ariel coming out into the yard after finishing her bath.

Shane quickly hid, and Ariel approached the fallen Ghost.

“There’s no choice.”

With Ariel now present, Shane decided to carry out his plan.

If he left to retrieve more sleep powder, it might be too late.

Ariel would definitely grow suspicious if she saw Ghost collapsed.

Shane stepped out from behind Ariel.

“Don’t worry about the wolf. It’s just asleep.”

At Shane’s words, Ariel turned around.

Her red eyes showed no emotion.

Even though a masked figure had suddenly appeared, she wasn’t startled.

She wasn’t afraid. She just quietly observed Shane.

Shane drew the wooden sword from his waist.

He had deliberately left his real sword behind.

He didn’t want to harm Ariel or Ghost.

That was the one thing Shane also didn’t want.

“Elf, give me the Castrack signet ring. Then nothing will happen.”

Shane took a step closer to Ariel.

“But if you refuse, I’ll have to kill you. Both you and the wolf.”

A menacing aura emanated from Shane, surrounding Ariel.

The killing intent was strong enough to make any girl of Ariel’s age collapse from fear.

But as expected, Ariel didn’t even flinch.

“I need to be careful.”

Shane had watched Ariel arm-wrestling earlier in the day and dueling Corbin at the banquet.

Based on what he had seen, Ariel was not someone to be underestimated.

She was small, but her strength was extraordinary.

She had easily overpowered a large man in arm-wrestling and knocked Corbin away with just a flick of her wrist.

Shane heightened his senses and cautiously approached Ariel.

He didn’t want to hurt her, but if Ariel used her strength, Shane would have to get serious.

Only then could he retrieve the ring successfully.

“You said you’d kill us? Me and Ghost.”

Ariel murmured softly.

Her voice was flat and emotionless.

Shane felt an odd sense of unease in her tone.

“What is this?”

Despite his declaration of killing her and the overwhelming aura of killing intent, Ariel showed no fear or readiness to fight.

She just stood there barefoot, in her pajamas, by Ghost’s side.

Shane repeated himself.

“Give me the Castrack signet ring, Elf!”

Ariel glanced down at the ring on her finger, then looked back at Shane.

Still expressionless.

It seemed she had no intention of giving up the ring.

Swish!

In the end, Shane lunged forward, swinging his wooden sword.

Now that things had come to this, he needed to subdue Ariel quickly and take the ring.

“I’ll have to settle this with speed.”

Shane wasn’t the type to be overpowered by strength.

But he also didn’t rely solely on strength.

He was both strong and fast.

This allowed him to use a combination of strength and speed when fighting barbarian warriors in the past.

Against strong barbarians, he would overwhelm them with speed, and against fast barbarians, he would overpower them with strength.

In short, he would assess his opponent’s weakness and exploit it.

It was a wise and efficient strategy.

Moreover, Shane was highly skilled in swordsmanship, so it was no wonder the barbarians feared him.

Swish!

Shane’s wooden sword came down, aiming for Ariel’s head.

It all happened in the blink of an eye.

It was a strike made with his maximum speed.

No one had been able to completely avoid this blow. Some had narrowly blocked it, but barely.

He thought that even though Ariel was strong, she would be hit by this blow, lose consciousness, and fall...

But just as he thought that, Shane's eyes widened.

Ariel, who had been right in front of him, had completely disappeared.

"Is this ring yours?"

A calm voice came from behind him.

Shane instinctively turned and swung his wooden sword.

Swish!

But once again, it hit nothing.

Ariel had already moved back, narrowly dodging his sword by the thinnest margin.

"!?"

Shane couldn't believe it. But his body moved on its own, continuing to attack Ariel.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Shane unleashed a barrage of strikes so fast they were invisible to the naked eye.

And yet, Ariel dodged them effortlessly.

"This... this is impossible...!"

Shane, who had never been outpaced in his life, couldn't keep up

with the movements of an elf girl around the same age as Karl.

“Huff... Huff...!”

His breathing grew ragged. Sweat poured down his face like rain.

Despite experiencing many battlefields, this was the first time he had encountered such an absurd situation.

Whoosh!

Once again, Shane’s wooden sword slashed through empty air.

Ariel’s monotonous voice reached his ears.

“Is this ring yours?”

Shane didn’t respond. He had no time to.

He simply gritted his teeth and continued attacking.

“Ugh!”

But nothing worked. He couldn’t even graze her clothes.

“This is impossible...!”

Shane’s sword struck toward Ariel’s face like lightning, but she dodged it by merely tilting her head slightly.

At that moment, for the first time, Ariel’s expression changed.

Her eyebrows furrowed slightly, as if annoyed.

Ariel’s eyes glowed red.

And in the next instant, her fist flew toward Shane.

“!!”

Shane panicked and tried to dodge, but it was too late.

Before he could react, Ariel’s fist struck him squarely in the solar

plexus.

Thud!

Just like Corbin at the banquet, Shane was sent flying, crashing into a wall.

The wooden sword he had been holding soared high into the air, spinning before embedding itself into the ground.

Ariel walked over to Shane, who was slumped against the wall.

She reached down and removed the mask from his face.

“Ugh...!”

A faint groan escaped Shane’s lips.

Despite being hit by Ariel’s punch, he hadn’t lost consciousness.

That was partly due to Shane’s exceptional skills as a knight, but more accurately, it was because Ariel had held back.

If she had used a bit more strength, Shane wouldn’t be alive.

His upper body would have been completely destroyed.

Shane gave a self-deprecating smile.

“It’s over...”

In the end, he hadn’t retrieved the ring. Worse, his identity had been revealed to Ariel.

Ariel might even confront Carl about it.

—Carl! Your knight tried to steal the ring you gave me! What’s going on?!

Of course, Ariel didn’t seem like the type to do that, but...

“At the very least, Carl will find out.”

Shane wanted to prevent that more than anything.

If Carl found out, he would feel betrayed and hurt.

“I know it’s shameless, but...”

Shane spoke through blood trickling down his lips.

“Please... don’t tell Carl... I beg you....”

Ariel tilted her head at his words.

Then, staring intently at his face, she asked,

“Who’s Carl?”

“.....”

Chapter 27 : Intruder (2)

Ariel couldn't remember Shane's face at all.

So, his effort to wear a mask had been pointless.

Since Ariel didn't remember Shane, she naturally didn't know who the "young master" he spoke of was.

From Ariel's perspective, Shane was just a robber who came in the middle of the night, wearing a mask and trying to steal a ring.

Which, to be fair, was true.

When Ariel asked who the young master was, Shane's expression turned into one of bewilderment, and soon after, he lost consciousness.

It was likely that his body had been completely wrecked by Ariel's punch.

Thinking that he might die if left untreated, Ariel went back to her room.

She brought Lu, who had been sprawled out, sleeping on the bed, back to where Shane was.

She intended to heal him.

Ariel poked Lu's face with her fingertip to wake him up.

"Ugh... What's going on...? Oh, Sis?!"

Lu's eyes snapped open, and he quickly sat up.

"Sis! Did you have a good time at the banquet?! But who's this guy?"

Lu turned his gaze to Shane.

“Oh, this guy? He’s the knight of that cocky brat, Carl Castrack! What’s he doing here?”

Only then did Ariel remember who Shane was.

He was the knight who had almost gotten into a fight at the banquet.

Then she could guess who Shane’s “young master” was as well.

It was the boy who had approached and spoken to her while she was on the terrace, watching the night sky with Selly.

Ariel lowered her gaze and looked at the ring on her finger.

This ring was indeed the one Carl had personally placed on her finger.

Of course, Ariel didn’t know why Carl had given her the ring, nor why Shane had come to retrieve it.

What was certain was that Ariel didn’t really need the ring.

If they had come to retrieve it, she could simply return it.

Earlier, Shane had been wearing a mask, and she hadn’t remembered who he was, so she hadn’t handed over the ring. But if Shane had revealed his identity and explained the situation, Ariel would have readily given him the ring.

In that case, he wouldn’t have needed to get punched by her and sent flying.

Ariel removed the ring from her finger and asked Lu to heal Shane.

“Hm, his condition is pretty serious.”

Lu muttered as he examined Shane.

“I can heal him, but it’ll be difficult for him to wake up immediately.”

By the time Shane opened his eyes, the morning sun was quietly rising.

...!

As Shane slowly looked around, he soon realized he was lying in an unfamiliar place and quickly sat up.

The events of the previous night came flooding back into his mind in sequence.

Last night, Shane had broken into Ariel's lodging to retrieve the Castrack signet ring.

Shane had first tried to put Ghost, the silver wolf who accompanied Ariel, to sleep using sleep powder.

But Ghost, being a mystical creature, hadn't fallen asleep easily, and Shane had ended up using all the sleep powder he had brought.

Then, Ariel had appeared.

Shane had decided to take the Castrack signet ring from Ariel by force, even though he didn't want to.

But despite swinging his wooden sword with full strength, he couldn't even graze her clothes, and in the end, he had been sent flying by a punch from Ariel and crashed into a wall.

He had lost consciousness after that.

Shane checked the condition of his body. Before he blacked out, he had been certain he was going to die.

All the bones near his solar plexus had been shattered. With injuries like that, surviving was next to impossible.

But now...

"My body is fine."

Shane's body was completely unscathed. None of his bones were

broken.

What on earth had happened last night?

One thing was certain: it hadn't been a dream. There were still traces of blood around Shane's mouth, and he was lying near the wall where he had crashed.

Could it be...

"Did that elf girl heal me?"

It was the only logical conclusion.

Otherwise, Shane being able to stand up now made no sense. He didn't have regenerative abilities like a troll.

Shane felt the powder scattered around him with his hand. It was definitely fairy healing powder.

Now that he thought about it, when he had seen Ariel before, she had been with a fairy.

It was reasonable to assume that the fairy accompanying Ariel had healed him using the healing powder.

But why...?

Shane had attacked Ariel.

Even though he hadn't intended to kill her, he had still said he would.

Yet, Ariel had saved him.

"Did she show mercy...?"

Shane didn't find this situation pleasant.

For a knight, defeat meant an honorable death. To be pleased by mercy from an enemy was unworthy of a knight.

What would have truly pleased Shane was to have the ring returned

to him...

At that moment, Shane's eyes widened.

The signet ring was now back on his finger.

It was unmistakably the Castrack signet ring.

Shane stared blankly at the ring in disbelief.

She returned it? But why? Sure, Shane had asked for it, but still, why?

"Does she not know the value of this ring?"

If Ariel had demanded money in exchange for the ring, Shane would have gladly paid any amount.

The Castrack signet ring was priceless, something that couldn't be bought with money.

That's why Shane had been willing to abandon his honor to retrieve it.

Although, in the end, he had failed...

The morning sunlight touched Shane's face. Squinting from the brightness, he suddenly realized something.

Now wasn't the time to be sitting around.

Today was the day they were scheduled to leave Sierra and head to the capital.

They were supposed to depart at dawn, which meant Carl and the others were probably looking for him at the lodging by now.

Although he didn't know why Ariel had returned the ring, he was relieved to have it back.

"I'd better get going."

Shane took the ring off his finger and placed it in his pocket. Even

though he had retrieved the ring, he had no intention of giving it back to Carl.

He planned to keep the ring until they returned to the north, where he would deliver it directly to the head of the Castrack family, without Carl knowing.

“What happens afterward will sort itself out.”

Shane’s role was to retrieve the ring and return it to the head of the Castrack family.

Whatever happened after that would be handled by the family head, and eventually, the ring would reach Princess Iliana.

Shane was about to leave when he saw something large and white.

It was the silver wolf, Ghost.

Ghost was lying quietly in the middle of the yard, watching Shane.

Considering how much sleep powder Shane had dumped on him, Ghost had woken up rather quickly.

If a human had been doused with that much sleep powder, they would have stayed asleep for at least two days.

Shane approached Ghost. Despite Shane coming closer, Ghost didn’t move.

Though it bared its teeth, it didn’t get up or attack.

Shane then noticed something small beside Ghost.

It was Ariel.

She was sleeping peacefully, hugging Ghost tightly.

Her expression was one of utter calm, completely at peace.

Ghost was staying still, seemingly afraid of waking Ariel.

“If I were a real enemy, I could have killed her.”

Shane thought as he looked at Ariel's sleeping face.

Last night, he hadn't been able to land a single blow on her, but if she were like this, fast asleep, it would be a different story.

It would be easy to kill a defenseless opponent.

Of course, that was just Shane's delusion.

Even if he had struck her with his real sword with all his might, Ariel wouldn't have shed a drop of blood. There was no way Shane's strength could break through her defenses.

"Are all elves this carefree... or is this girl just unique...?"

Shane chuckled.

In the end, it was Shane who had made a mistake. He had broken in and tried to steal the ring.

If Shane had been in her shoes, he would have killed his enemy without hesitation.

Showing mercy to an enemy was foolish.

In that sense, Ariel...

...He couldn't bring himself to speak ill of her.

Shane scratched the back of his neck. Thanks to Ariel, he was alive, and he had the ring back. He owed her gratitude.

Shane quietly stepped back to avoid waking Ariel.

As he left, he thought about her.

"It makes sense that the young master is smitten with her..."

In a way, she suited Carl more than Princess Iliana did.

In the north, strong women were valued.

And Ariel was undoubtedly stronger than Shane. Even if Shane

fought with all his might, he couldn't defeat her.

It would be difficult to find someone stronger than her in the north.

"Maybe I made the wrong choice...?"

Shane began to feel uncertain about his decisions.

Perhaps letting Carl and Ariel be together would have been better for the future of the north.

But it was too late now. The ring had already been retrieved.

"...I hope we meet again someday."

Before leaving the courtyard of Ariel's lodging, Shane glanced back at her.

She was still sound asleep, hugging Ghost tightly.

Chapter 28 : Companion (1)

“Hehe.”

Lu lifted the corners of her mouth and flew over the lake.

Then, she quickly spun her body, creating a dusting of sleep powder.

The sleep powder that was created from Lu’s body fell onto the lake, and soon after, a few fish floated up to the surface.

The fish had fallen asleep after being hit by Lu’s sleep powder.

Lu didn’t stop there. This time, she used flight powder to lift the sleeping fish into the air and then pushed them toward the ground with her hands.

On the ground, Ariel and Ghost were standing idly.

The fish fell one after another in front of Ariel and Ghost.

“Did you see that, Ghost? This is the fairy way of fishing. Isn’t it amazing?”

Lu spoke proudly, placing her hands on her hips, but Ghost showed little interest.

Ariel, standing next to him, wasn’t interested either.

“Ahem.”

Feeling awkward, Lu cleared her throat and said,

“Anyway, sister, since I caught the fish, how about we eat these for today’s meal?”

Ariel looked down at the scattered fish.

Her face darkened, clearly showing that she had no appetite for them.

“Not appealing, is it? Well, they might not look great, but once you clean and grill them, they taste quite... Oh, sister?!”

Before Lu could finish, Ariel had already turned around and started walking away.

“Ghost, what about you? You usually eat wild animals, so... hey, you too?!”

Ghost also followed Ariel, leaving Lu behind.

Lu quickly hurried after them.

“Wait, sister!”

Ariel sat down on a nearby rock, pulled some jerky from her inventory, and started eating it.

It was jerky she had bought from the city of Sierra.

She handed some to Ghost, and they both munched on it.

“Sigh, if you keep eating only jerky and desserts every day, it’ll be bad for your health, sister,”

Lu began to nag.

“You should eat fish like that sometimes to get proper nutrients. That way, you’ll grow taller too...”

Ariel handed Lu some fruit wine.

“Thank you!”

Lu gratefully took the wine and quickly took a gulp.

“Ah! It’s the best!”

After they peacefully finished their meal by the lake, Ariel stood up from the rock.

She intended to wash herself.

When staying in inns, she used the bath, but now that they were away from the city, she thought it best to wash in the lake whenever they passed by one.

For the record, Ariel was heading west.

She had heard from the merchant Lloyd that the Dwarf Mountains were in the west.

Ariel had always wanted to meet a dwarf.

In fact, when she first started her adventure, her first thought was, ‘I want to meet a dwarf.’

For some reason, she had always liked the dwarves.

Their short, stocky bodies, rugged beards, and craftsmanship...

Whenever there was a dwarf character in a game, she would always choose it.

‘I’ll see them soon...’

Ariel thought as she stepped into the lake.

Due to her short stature, the water quickly reached her chest after she went in just a little.

She lowered her head, submerging her silver hair in the lake water, and at that moment, Lu shouted from afar.

“Sister, sister!!”

Ariel looked toward Lu.

Ghost, who had been eating jerky, jumped up, and Lu was bouncing around, pointing urgently behind Ariel.

“Watch out! Behind you, behind you!”

Ariel turned around. At that moment, a huge creature rose from the

lake.

It was a giant crimson-colored worm.

It was about 5 meters long.

As the giant worm rose, it cast a shadow over Ariel as the sunlight was blocked.

“Kiieeek!”

The worm let out a terrible screech and opened its jaws wide.

Its mouth was filled with sharp, thorn-like teeth.

“Sister! That’s a dangerous monster called a Minocaon! You need to get away immediately...!”

Lu started flying toward her, and Ghost leaped into the lake, rushing to Ariel.

At that moment, a purple orb shot out from the Minocaon’s mouth, heading straight for Ariel.

Ariel quickly tried to deploy a shield.

She didn’t know what the purple orb was, but she had a bad feeling about it.

However, just before Ariel could deploy her shield, a white barrier spread out above her head.

Paah!

The purple orb from the Minocaon hit the white barrier and disappeared into smoke.

The white barrier also vanished soon after.

“Are you hurt?”

Two people were standing next to Ariel now.

A woman with red hair and a man with golden hair.

Both were young.

“Phew, that was close.”

The red-haired woman said as she looked at Ariel, then drew her sword from her waist.

Srrrng!

“Mitchell, I’ll take care of the Minocaon. You get the child out of the lake.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay by yourself?”

“Don’t you trust my skills?”

“Of course I do.”

At that moment, the Minocaon opened its mouth again.

The same purple orb from earlier was forming inside its jaws.

“Get moving!”

The red-haired woman leaped toward the Minocaon.

Meanwhile, the man, called Mitchell, said, “Excuse me,” and lifted Ariel, carrying her out of the lake.

“Sister!”

Lu arrived just a moment too late and looked at Mitchell suspiciously.

“Who... who are you? Why are you carrying my sister?”

Ghost also growled and glared at Mitchell.

“Haha, so you have companions,”

Mitchell said with a gentle smile as he walked out of the lake.

“Don’t worry. I’m just trying to keep her safe.”

After setting Ariel down on a rock, Mitchell examined her to make sure she wasn’t hurt.

Ariel quietly watched Mitchell.

Mitchell was dressed in priestly robes.

That meant the white barrier that had protected Ariel earlier was likely cast by Mitchell.

“You must have been scared. Minocaons are monsters that suddenly appear at quiet lakesides like this and eat people. You have to be careful.”

Mitchell took out a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Ariel.

But Ariel didn’t take it. Instead, she turned her gaze toward the lake, where the Minocaon and the red-haired woman were.

“It’s alright. If it’s Jenny, she’ll take down the Minocaon easily,”

Mitchell said, trying to reassure her, but Ariel wasn’t really worried in the first place.

She was just curious about the Minocaon. She had never seen such a large worm before.

As expected, the red-haired woman, Jenny, soon finished off the Minocaon and walked out of the lake.

“Mitchell, is the child okay?”

“She’s fine.”

The one who wasn’t fine was Jenny herself.

One of her arms was covered in a purple liquid, and smoke was rising from her skin as it melted.

“As expected, the Minocaon’s poison is strong.”

Mitchell muttered as Jenny scowled.

“What are you admiring for? Hurry up and heal me.”

“Alright.”

A white light formed in Mitchell’s hands.

He brought the light to Jenny’s wound, and her injury healed instantly.

It was healing magic on par with a fairy’s healing powder, performed by a priest.

Jenny was a striking beauty.

Her vibrant red hair and a slender body honed through swordsmanship, along with a full chest.

She was more than enough to catch the eyes of men on the street.

Mitchell was also handsome, with refined blond hair. Though a bit thin, he was tall, with a gentle smile and manner of speaking.

The two of them together looked like the perfect couple, but they didn’t seem to be romantically involved.

And yet, they didn’t quite seem like simple comrades either.

Mitchell wore priestly robes, while Jenny looked like a wandering adventurer.

Jenny crouched down to meet Ariel’s gaze and asked,

“Hi there, what’s your name?”

“Ariel.”

“Ariel, huh~ What were you doing by the lakeside, Ariel? Playing in the water?”

“Hey, human! Don’t treat my sister like a little kid!”

Lu shouted from Ariel's shoulder.

Jenny smiled at Lu.

"Oh, a healthy fairy. I bet you'd fetch a high price if I put you in a jar and sold you."

"...!"

Lu flinched, trembling at Jenny's words, but Jenny waved her hand dismissively.

"Just kidding, just kidding. By the way, you're quite an unusual group. An elf, a fairy, and is that... a wolf? It's huge."

When Jenny reached out to pet Ghost, he backed away, growling fiercely.

"Oh my, how scary."

Jenny withdrew her hand and looked back at Ariel.

"So, where are you headed, Ariel?"

"We're going to the Dwarf Mountains in the west."

Once again, Lu answered in Ariel's place.

"Really? That's the same direction we're headed. Since we've met like this, why don't we travel together?"

Jenny glanced at Mitchell, who shrugged as if to say, "Do as you like."

"What do you think, Ariel? Why don't you come with me? I'll keep you safe on the journey. I may not look it, but I'm really strong."

"Hmph, but you're no match for my sister. My sister once took down a troll with a single punch."

At Lu's boast, Jenny covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes widening dramatically.

“Oh, really~?”

It was a clear case of an adult pretending to be amazed by a child's tall tale.

“Ariel, you must be really strong~ In that case, maybe you can protect me instead~”

Jenny playfully pinched Ariel's cheek.

“So, Ariel, will you travel with me?”

Chapter 29 : Companion (2)

Jenny, who had pinched Ariel's cheek, shivered.

Ariel's cheek was softer and more squishy than she had expected.

'It feels like slime...'

With a blissful expression, Jenny stretched Ariel's cheeks to both sides.

It was an unconscious action.

"Hey, what are you doing! Stop bothering my sister!"

Lu tried to push Jenny's hand away, and when that didn't work, she even bit Jenny's wrist, but Jenny didn't stop.

"Jenny, please stop...."

Even Mitchell joined in to intervene.

"You're going to tear her cheeks at this rate."

Ariel's cheeks had stretched to their limit.

Startled, Jenny quickly let go of Ariel's cheeks.

"Oh, I didn't realize...."

"Look, her cheeks are all red. And she looks completely terrified."

Mitchell looked at Ariel as he spoke.

Although Ariel wore her usual blank expression, to some, she might have looked like she was frozen in fear.

“M-M-My apologies, Ariel. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Don’t be scared.”

Jenny gently patted Ariel’s cheeks, flustered.

“So Ariel, come with me. I’ll keep you safe.”

Jenny’s expression as she repeated the offer was so earnest, it bordered on desperate.

Seeing this, Ariel slowly nodded her head.

After all, Ariel’s goal was adventure.

Meeting new people on the road was also a part of that adventure.

As long as they were headed in the same direction, it didn’t seem like a bad idea to travel together.

Jenny and Mitchell were clearly not a couple.

Nor were they simple companions.

To be precise, Mitchell had hired Jenny as a bodyguard.

Mitchell was a priest, and Jenny was an adventurer.

Mitchell had been tasked with investigating an abandoned temple, and he had hired Jenny to escort him.

The abandoned temple Mitchell was investigating was located in the west, and they were expected to reach it by tomorrow evening.

“So until tomorrow evening, let’s stick together~.”

Jenny didn’t hesitate to express her affection, hugging Ariel tightly and rubbing her face against hers.

To Ariel, it was a bit bothersome and overwhelming, but knowing Jenny didn’t mean any harm, she let it slide.

Of course, this was only possible because Jenny was beautiful.

If it had been a rough-looking man doing what Jenny did, even Ariel would have felt uncomfortable and used her strength to stop him.

“This is the first time I’ve seen Jenny like this.”

Mitchell said with a quiet smile, and Lu glanced at him.

“How is she normally?”

“Well, how should I put it? Jenny usually has this tough and cold image.”

Mitchell was putting it as nicely as possible.

If someone else were describing her, they might have called Jenny a madwoman without hesitation.

“Jenny is courageous enough to never back down from an enemy.”

In other words, she was the type to draw her sword the moment she saw an enemy, earning her the reputation of a crazy person.

Of course, Mitchell, being a priest, would never say something like that out loud.

“But now, she just looks like an ordinary woman who loves children. It’s refreshing. I’m a little envious.”

“Envious of who?”

“Of Ariel, of course.”

Mitchell’s gaze was fixed ahead.

And there, Jenny was hugging Ariel’s face tightly against her large chest.

Ariel was flailing her arms, clearly struggling to breathe.

“I’d like to experience that at least once... um, forget what I just said.”

Hearing this, Lu quietly moved closer to Ghost.

From her point of view, Mitchell didn't seem entirely normal either.

As the sun set and darkness descended, they began preparing for camp.

With Lu, the fairy, they didn't have to worry about getting lost in the dark forest, but they still needed to be wary of monster attacks.

Being surrounded by monsters in the dark could lead to heavy casualties.

Even someone as skilled as Jenny, who had easily defeated the Minocaon, couldn't afford to let her guard down.

Complacency was the enemy.

"Hm, this spot looks good."

Mitchell surveyed the surrounding terrain as he spoke.

Though he was young and capable, Mitchell often found himself camping outdoors more often than in a temple due to the nature of his work.

As a result, he had developed a keen eye for choosing good campsites.

The spot Mitchell selected had a clear view of the surroundings and a rocky wall behind them, making it easy to keep watch.

"Let's eat dinner first."

Jenny gathered some nearby firewood and lit a fire, while Mitchell took meat and spices from his bag and began cooking.

Soon, a savory aroma filled the air as stew bubbled over the fire.

"Come here, Ariel."

Jenny patted her lap, inviting Ariel to sit.

"I'll feed you."

Ariel ignored Jenny's invitation and sat next to Mitchell. Jenny chuckled softly.

"Shy, aren't you?"

In truth, Ariel was embarrassed.

Even though her body had shrunk, the thought of sitting on someone's lap was still too humiliating to bear.

The stew Mitchell cooked was quite delicious. Even Ariel, who usually stuck to jerky and desserts, ate it with satisfaction.

Ghost licked his bowl clean, and Lu, after coaxing Ariel into giving her some fruit wine, enjoyed the stew as a side dish.

"Hmm, this is excellent fruit wine."

Mitchell also drank some of the wine.

"It's on par with the finest wine served at the Grand Temple."

"Is that so? I'd love to try that Grand Temple wine sometime."

While Mitchell and Lu were busy drinking fruit wine, Jenny quietly approached Ariel.

"Shall we go wash up?"

"...?"

Ariel's eyes widened in surprise. Wash up? Did she mean together?

"N-no, I'm fine..."

"Come on, Ariel. There's a stream nearby. I'll help you wash up."

Jenny took Ariel's hand and led her away, with Ariel reluctantly trailing behind.

Of course, if Ariel used even a bit of her strength, she could easily throw Jenny far away, but she couldn't bring herself to do that.

So Ariel had no choice but to let herself be pulled along.

Ghost followed them quietly, leaving just Mitchell and Lu behind.

“Hm.”

Mitchell muttered to himself with a serious expression.

“Do you think it’s okay to sneak a peek?”

“...”

Lu pretended not to hear and continued drinking her fruit wine.

After finishing their bath, Ariel returned to the camp completely deflated.

Her face, neck, and ears were all red, and her gaze was firmly fixed on the ground.

Anyone seeing her might have thought she had been bullied.

‘Hehe, she’s so shy.’

Jenny thought to herself as she dried Ariel’s wet body with a towel.

Ariel quietly glanced over at Ghost, who was shaking off water from his fur.

When Jenny and Ariel returned to the campsite, Mitchell and Lu were completely drunk.

“Sister! I missed you!”

“Ugh, Jenny, you’re back?”

Jenny frowned and slapped Mitchell on the shoulder.

“Mitchell, how much did you drink? You need to sober up. It’s your turn to keep watch.”

“Yes.”

Mitchell nodded and began casting a spell.

Just as a fairy could use healing powder to sober up, a priest could use holy magic to dispel alcohol from their system.

“What do you mean by keeping watch?”

Lu asked, staggering slightly.

“Why would you need to keep watch?”

“In case of a monster attack, we take turns standing guard. It’s my turn tonight.”

Mitchell’s explanation made Lu chuckle.

“Fools. We have magic for that. My sister always casts a shield before she sleeps.”

“?”

Mitchell and Jenny looked bewildered.

Casting a shield before sleeping? That sounded ridiculous.

“Ariel, can you use magic?”

Jenny asked, and Ariel nodded, though she still couldn’t meet Jenny’s eyes and kept her gaze distant.

“Wow, that’s impressive. I’ve heard elves have a high ratio of mages, but still, that’s quite something!”

Jenny gave Ariel’s backside a couple of pats, and Mitchell interjected.

“That’s not the point. Casting a shield and sleeping through it, that’s just...”

Mitchell seemed skeptical.

Casting a shield required a significant amount of mana.

Maintaining it for a short time was one thing, but keeping it up while

sleeping was unthinkable, even for a grand mage.

The same went for priests.

Though Mitchell was a talented priest with strong holy power for his age, maintaining a “Holy Shield” while sleeping was unimaginable.

Even if it could be done, the holy power would run out quickly, and the shield would collapse.

“Haha.”

Mitchell laughed, assuming Lu was exaggerating.

“Sleeping with a shield up, if that were possible, no one would need to keep watch anymore. It’s a fun idea, though. It would certainly be convenient.”

Aside from the problem of maintaining the shield, it would need to cover the entire group to be effective.

That kind of feat was not something an ordinary mage or priest could achieve.

Mitchell himself could barely shield his own body, let alone cover the entire group.

“But my sister can do it...”

Lu scratched her neck, and Jenny looked at Ariel with a serious expression.

“Is what Lu said true, Ariel?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you show us?”

“Haha! That’s enough, Jenny.”

Mitchell stood up.

“I’ll keep watch. Ariel, there’s no need to...”

“Shield.”

Ariel quietly muttered, and a blue barrier spread around the area.

Chapter 30 : Companion (3)

The blue shield that Ariel had deployed was large enough to completely cover the group.

Its color was so vivid that it looked like it wouldn't break easily, even under significant impact.

‘What is this...’

Mitchell stood there with a dumbfounded expression.

Although he was a priest, Mitchell had substantial knowledge of magic, and he understood just how advanced the shield Ariel had cast truly was.

There were probably only a handful of mages in the entire empire capable of casting a shield of this caliber.

And even if someone could deploy such a shield, maintaining it while sleeping?

Mitchell couldn't even begin to imagine how much mana would be required to pull that off.

On the other hand, Jenny, who didn't know much about magic, seemed less surprised than Mitchell.

“Wow, so we can just sleep like this?”

She was simply happy.

“Not having to stand guard means we can finally sleep soundly!”

“Jenny... don't you think this is a bit strange...?” Mitchell asked quietly.

“The fact that Ariel can deploy a shield like this means her magic skills rival that of a grand mage.”

“Really? She doesn’t look it.”

“You shouldn’t judge by appearances. From what I can see, Ariel possesses tremendous magical power.”

“Should I ask her directly?”

Jenny approached Ariel, who was petting Ghost inside the shield.

“Ariel, can you use other magic besides this shield?”

Jenny asked, and Ariel nodded.

“Magic Missile.”

“Wow, really? Ariel, that’s amazing! Anything else?”

“That’s all.”

“I see~”

Mitchell’s expression grew more complicated as he overheard their conversation.

...She can only use Magic Missile and Shield?

That would mean she only knows beginner-level spells.

‘But this shield is far from beginner-level...’

Jenny nudged Mitchell in the side.

“Mitchell, did you hear that? No need to overthink it. Ariel’s an elf, not a human. Elves naturally have a strong affinity for mana.

So even if her magic skills aren’t that high, she can still cast a shield like this.”

“Now that you mention it... that might be true.”

Mitchell realized he hadn't interacted with many elves before.

Elves were known for their strong mana affinity, with a high proportion of mages among them.

Given that, maybe this level of shielding wasn't that impressive for an elf.

'I've been thinking too much in human terms...'

Following Jenny's advice, Mitchell decided not to overcomplicate things.

He accepted that an elf with strong mana affinity might be able to create such a shield.

However, that wasn't the truth.

The idea that elves had a high affinity for mana and a higher proportion of mages was a misconception.

Because they lived in the forest and loved nature, humans had projected their own ideas onto them, but in reality, elves weren't all that different from humans.

There were elves who were bad at magic, and some had no talent for mana at all.

If an elf knowledgeable in magic had seen the shield Ariel created, they would have been just as shocked as Mitchell.

Thanks to Ariel's shield, the group was able to sleep safely and comfortably.

But the one who had cast the shield, Ariel, ended up having a nightmare.

In her dream, two giant rubber balloons were pressing down on her face.

Ariel struggled to breathe and flailed her body, eventually waking up.

When she woke up, something was indeed pressing against her face.

It was Jenny's chest.

Jenny had been hugging Ariel's face tightly against her chest while they slept.

"Oh, Ariel, you're awake."

Jenny smiled brightly and patted Ariel on the head.

"Did you sleep well?"

Ariel hadn't slept well at all, but she simply nodded and sat up.

It was already morning.

Ghost was awake, while Lu and Mitchell were still passed out drunk.

"Ariel, can you lower the shield?"

Jenny pointed outside the shield.

"I'd like to take care of that guy over there. He's been staring at us since earlier, and it's making me uncomfortable."

Outside the shield stood a monster that Ariel recognized—a troll.

"It looks like it's been waiting to eat us, but it won't go as it plans."

With a confident smile, Jenny drew her sword.

"I told you, didn't I? Your big sister is super strong. You don't have to worry about a thing. I've taken down trolls many times before. You'll be safe."

At Jenny's words, Ariel lowered the shield.

As the blue barrier disappeared, the troll let out a fierce roar.

"Graaaaarrrr!!"

"What the—?!"

The troll's roar startled Lu and Mitchell awake, and Ghost stood up, ready for action.

Swish!

Jenny charged toward the troll, while the troll swung its club at her.

Moments later...

"Huff... huff..."

Jenny panted heavily as she wiped the blood from her face.

Just as she had told Ariel, Jenny had skillfully defeated the troll.

"Since trolls have strong regenerative abilities, you have to aim for the neck," Jenny said as she sheathed her sword.

"But that's not easy. First, you need to attack the legs to slow the troll's movement, then attack the arms so it can't fight back. After that, you go for the neck."

It was the most ideal method of troll hunting known among adventurers.

"That way, you can efficiently take down a troll. Of course, knowing the method doesn't mean just anyone can do it. It takes someone at my level to pull it off. What do you think, Ariel? Isn't your big sister amazing?"

If it had been a child from a village, they might have gazed at Jenny with admiration and nodded excitedly.

But Ariel wasn't that child.

She simply stared at the troll's corpse.

The troll's limbs were mangled, and its head had been severed.

Its body was too damaged to fetch a decent price.

Monster corpses lost value the more they were damaged.

From Ariel's perspective, it was a waste.

There was no point in putting the troll's body into her inventory.

"Are you hurt, Jenny?"

Mitchell, now fully alert, approached Jenny.

"My wrist's a bit injured."

Jenny had fractured one of her wrists while blocking the troll's club.

Mitchell quickly cast a healing spell and said,

"Still, to defeat a troll with just that injury... you truly are remarkable."

Jenny shrugged nonchalantly in response to Mitchell's compliment.

"Well, I'm strong."

In truth, Jenny didn't care much about Mitchell's praise.

What she wanted was a reaction from Ariel.

She hoped Ariel would look at her with admiration, even if it wasn't as enthusiastic as shouting, "Big sister, you're amazing!"

But Ariel didn't even glance at Jenny. Instead, she furrowed her brow and kept staring at the troll's corpse.

'Maybe it was too gruesome...?'

Jenny had swung her sword a bit more aggressively than usual, fully aware that Ariel was watching.

As a result, the troll's body was completely mangled, and Jenny wondered if it looked too grotesque in Ariel's eyes.

"...Let's move on. The smell of troll blood might attract more monsters."

In truth, Jenny wasn't too worried about more monsters showing up.

Now that the sun was up, she felt confident that she could handle any monster that came their way.

Jenny's concern was for Ariel.

She wanted to get Ariel away from the gruesome troll corpse as soon as possible.

"Let's do that," Mitchell agreed.

"There's no need to fight more monsters unnecessarily."

With that, the group quickly moved away from the area.

"So, Ariel, why are you going to the Dwarf Mountains?"

Jenny asked as they walked through the forest.

Ariel simply replied, "I want to meet the dwarves."

"You want to meet the dwarves? But elves and dwarves don't get along."

Jenny was right.

Elves loved nature, while dwarves were known for destroying it.

Naturally, conflict had arisen between the two races.

In the past, they had even fought a fierce war.

However, the appearance of the demon race had forced the elves and dwarves to sign a truce, which lasted to this day.

To be precise, neither race had the strength to fight each other, as both had suffered heavy losses while driving out the demons.

Of course, while they weren't at war, the two races still harbored dislike for each other. If they met on the road, they would at least exchange scowls.

"Aren't you worried you might get hurt if you go there?"

Jenny was concerned for Ariel.

As an experienced adventurer, Jenny had been to the Dwarf Mountains several times, and she knew how foul-tempered dwarves could be.

“Those short guys are so touchy. And so many of them are drunks. Sure, their craftsmanship is excellent—their weapons are flawless. But you don’t really need any of that, do you, Ariel? So why do you want to meet a dwarf?”

Ariel thought for a moment and then answered,

“No reason.”

That was the truth. There wasn’t any specific explanation.

“I just like dwarves.”

Jenny was left speechless, and Mitchell chimed in.

“In that case, Ariel, how about you check out the abandoned temple I’m investigating? It’s an ancient temple built by dwarves. Nowadays, dwarves are too proud to build for humans, but in the past, they did it occasionally.”

“Really?”

Jenny looked at Ariel.

“What do you think, Ariel? Want to come see the temple Mitchell is investigating?”

Ariel nodded without hesitation.

Chapter 31 : Dragon (1)

The temple that Mitchell mentioned was situated quite high up.

Climbing the steep slope proved to be extremely difficult for Mitchell, and even Jenny, a skilled adventurer, was breathing heavily.

In contrast, Ariel remained calm, without a single drop of sweat on her face. For her, the steep incline was no different from flat ground.

“Huff, huff, I can’t go any further.”

Mitchell collapsed onto the ground.

“My legs won’t move.”

Jenny frowned.

“Stop whining. What are we supposed to do if you just sit down?”

“I need to rest for a bit. I might die at this rate. Please.”

“Get up now.”

Jenny grabbed Mitchell by the collar and forcibly pulled him to his feet, forcing him to keep climbing with a pained expression.

When they finally arrived, the temple was so massive it left them speechless.

Jenny looked up at the temple and muttered,

“...Are you sure this was built by dwarves? Not giants?”

“The records definitely state that it was built by dwarves. In any case, we should investigate.”

Wiping the sweat from his face, Mitchell entered the temple first, while Jenny took Ariel's hand.

"Let's go in, Ariel."

As they walked together, Ariel glanced around the temple.

This ancient temple, said to have been built long ago, was visibly weathered, showing clear signs of age.

Weeds grew on the floor, and vines crept up the walls.

Despite that, the structure showed no signs of collapse or damage.

"Indeed, it seems quite sturdy, likely thanks to the dwarves' craftsmanship. Even after hundreds of years, it seems unaffected."

Ariel nodded slightly at Jenny's remark.

Even to her, the building appeared incredibly strong, almost tempting her to punch it just to see if it would hold up.

"There doesn't seem to be anything unusual."

Mitchell spoke from the front.

"They say there's supposed to be some sort of sinister energy here, but I don't feel anything like that. It might have just been a prank...."

"So, we've come all this way for nothing?"

"That seems likely. If there were any demons or monsters nearby, there would surely be traces. But, just to be safe, let's check inside."

Mitchell continued walking deeper into the temple. As they went further in, the air grew cooler.

The interior of the temple was dark, but they could see somewhat thanks to the moonlight coming in through the windows.

"Hm."

Mitchell stopped walking.

They had reached what seemed to be the heart of the temple.

It was the prayer hall.

The hall was dome-shaped and vast, almost like a giant plaza.

On the walls were paintings that appeared to depict ancient gods, and in the center of the high ceiling was a hole through which a beam of moonlight shone directly down.

Rather than feeling any demonic presence, the place felt sacred and serene.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary. We should probably head back—”

Mitchell’s words were interrupted by movement from a corner of the prayer hall.!”

Jenny quickly drew her sword, and Mitchell began casting a holy spell.

Ghost bared his teeth and crouched low, while Lu hurriedly hid behind Ariel.

Ariel quietly watched the corner of the prayer hall.

Thump. Thump.

Footsteps echoed as someone slowly walked toward them.

The figure was small, about the same size as Ariel, making it hard to see in the darkness.

As the figure reached the center of the hall, where the moonlight shone, their appearance became clear.

“.....?”

The figure walking from the corner of the hall was a young girl.

“...?”

Jenny wore an expression of disbelief.

This temple had been abandoned long ago.

It was located deep in an isolated forest, a ruin in the middle of nowhere.

How could a young girl be here, alone?

Moreover, the girl was dressed in an elegant, frilly dress, with pale skin and a pretty face.

Her hair and eyes were golden, and she carried an air of refinement that made it clear she didn't belong in a place like this.

"Hey, little one, what are you doing here?"

Jenny sheathed her sword and asked.

Though they hadn't yet determined the girl's identity, she was still just a child, so there was no need for weapons.

Mitchell also canceled his spell and relaxed his stance.

The only one still on alert was Ghost.

"Did you get lost?"

Jenny smiled warmly and approached the girl.

Jenny had already assumed the girl was a noble's daughter, as everything about her appearance suggested that.

"Heh."

The girl suddenly chuckled.

"How amusing."

She glanced at each member of the group with a condescending gaze.

"A human, an elf, a fairy, and a wolf. What a pathetic bunch."

“.....”

Jenny froze. A strange aura was now radiating from the girl's body.

“Normally, I wouldn't let intruders in my territory live,”

the girl said, her expression one of boredom.

“But killing you now feels like too much effort. I'll spare you this time. So...”

The girl's eyes glowed golden.

[Get lost!]

Boom!

The girl's final words weren't spoken in any human language.

She had projected her will directly into their minds.

“Ugh!”

Jenny and Mitchell collapsed, bleeding from their noses, while Ghost whimpered and lay flat on the ground.

Lu simply fainted.

The only ones left standing were the girl and Ariel.

Mitchell tried to lift himself up, but his body trembled and wouldn't move.

He glanced over and saw Jenny struggling to stand, biting her lip.

‘This...’

Mitchell had never experienced anything like it before, but he had a good idea of what it meant.

No, he had a good idea of who this girl really was.

‘A... dragon....’

The girl's final words, [Get lost!], hadn't been mere communication—they were meant to instill mental terror.

In other words, it was Dragon Fear.

The fact that she used Dragon Fear meant the girl's true identity was a dragon.

That explained why she was here alone in this ruin.

Dragons were reclusive creatures. Perhaps she was planning to make this place her lair.

'We need to run....'

Mitchell knew how arrogant dragons were.

To a dragon, human lives were as insignificant as dust.

If a dragon chose to spare them, they needed to leave immediately. If the dragon changed her mind, they could be reduced to ashes in an instant.

Resisting would be pointless.

Dragons were the most powerful creatures on earth.

There had once been a case of a kingdom hunting a dragon in the past. They had targeted the dragon's scales, claws, and heart.

Of course, they couldn't hunt an adult dragon with human power, so they went after a young dragon instead.

The hunt was successful, and those who killed the young dragon were awarded the title of 'Dragon Slayer' by the king.

The people praised the Dragon Slayers as heroes. After all, they had slain the most powerful creature on earth—an incredible feat.

The next day, however, the kingdom was wiped off the map.

The enraged dragons had turned the kingdom to ash. It happened in just one day.

Since then, humans had not only avoided provoking dragons but had even begun to worship them.

“Oh?”

The girl, the dragon, looked intrigued.

“There’s someone who isn’t affected by my fear?”

She smiled wickedly and slowly walked toward Ariel.

The dragon’s golden eyes were fixed on Ariel, and Ariel stared right back.

They were both small, so their gazes were perfectly aligned.

“You’re a cheeky little elf. I can’t let you live. You’re worth killing.”

The dragon extended her hand, and a magic circle formed beneath Ariel’s feet, summoning a pillar of fire.

Whoosh!

The flames were powerful enough to melt the surroundings, but Ariel stood there, completely unharmed.

“?”

The dragon’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“What? Why...?”

Dragons were immensely proud and never doubted their magical abilities.

They were born with perfect mastery of magic.

To a dragon, casting magic was as natural as breathing.

“My magic... isn’t working...?”

But now, this dragon was beginning to doubt her magic.

Ariel, with her childlike appearance, seemed like an easy target—yet the dragon couldn't burn her with magic. It made sense for the dragon to question her own skill.

If the dragon had been more experienced, she might have realized that Ariel was no ordinary opponent and wouldn't have doubted her magic.

However, this dragon was inexperienced.

She had only just left her mother's side and was about to establish her own lair for the first time.

"Aren't you hot...? You should be burning...."

The dragon grew flustered and poured even more mana into her spell.

Whoosh!

The pillar of fire around Ariel blazed even hotter, almost spreading to where Mitchell and Jenny stood.

"Shield."

But Ariel calmly cast a shield, and the flames were immediately blocked.

The dragon's powerful magic had no effect on either of them.

"Hey!"

The dragon, now furious, yelled.

"Fight me properly, elf!"

Ariel, who had been quietly observing the dragon, finally nodded.

Chapter 32 : Dragon (2)

A few days ago, the dragon, Lakia, discovered an abandoned temple.

Lakia had just left her mother's protection and was searching for a place to make her own lair when she found the temple.

The temple immediately captivated her.

The structure was grand and sturdy, and it seemed like it could withstand centuries without crumbling.

It might not compare to her mother's lair, but for her first independent lair, it looked quite impressive.

Lakia, filled with excitement, entered the temple and immediately encountered a monster inside.

The monster resembled a giant snake, and as soon as it saw Lakia, it charged at her with its mouth wide open.

It probably didn't realize that Lakia was a dragon since she was using the Polymorph spell to appear in human form.

If Lakia had been in her true dragon form, the monster wouldn't have dared to attack.

In fact, it likely would have fled with its tail between its legs instead of charging.

At any rate, when Lakia saw the monster rushing toward her, she was slightly frightened.

It was her first time stepping out from under her mother's protection.

It was also the first time she had been attacked by another being.

Lakia instinctively wanted to flee, but she gathered her courage and decided to face the monster.

She had just become independent, and she wanted to handle at least this much on her own. She couldn't rely on her mother forever.

Moreover, she was aware that she was a dragon.

According to her mother, there was no being in this world capable of challenging a dragon.

Once a dragon reaches a certain age and masters magic, no creature on land can be a match for them.

Lakia had already mastered all forms of magic.

So, dealing with a mere monster should have been an easy task.

Lakia cast a spell at the monster, and it was reduced to ashes.

“Ah.”

Lakia felt immensely proud after defeating the monster.

Indeed, dragons were strong. A great species that could reduce other inferior races to ashes in an instant.

After claiming the temple as her lair, Lakia spent her days sleeping or lazing around.

There wasn't much to do in a lair, but she didn't feel bored.

Dragons don't experience feelings like boredom.

‘Because they are solitary and absolute beings...’

However, when someone visited the temple, Lakia couldn't help but feel a bit pleased.

The visitors were a diverse group of humans, elves, fairies, and wolves.

‘What? Aren't different races supposed to avoid mingling with one

another...? Don't tell me, everyone except dragons is getting along just fine...?'

Lakia felt a slight twinge of jealousy and unease, and for some reason, she wanted to have a conversation with them.

But she couldn't bring herself to do it.

After all, dragons are the mightiest creatures on earth.

For a proud dragon to mingle with inferior races was something unacceptable... or so Lakia had been thoroughly indoctrinated by other dragons, which caused her to unknowingly adopt a haughty attitude.

[Be gone!]

She even used Dragon Fear to subdue the group.

According to her mother, most beings would cower under the influence of Dragon Fear.

That turned out to be true.

The humans collapsed, bleeding, and the wolf whimpered and lay flat on the ground, while the fairy fainted.

But the elf wasn't affected.

Surprisingly, the elf stood still and stared blankly at Lakia.

That the Dragon Fear didn't work on the elf was unexpected, but Lakia wasn't too worried.

The elf seemed to be of similar age to her.

Elf versus dragon.

If they fought, of course, the dragon would win.

Just as she had dealt with the monster, Lakia cast a spell at the elf.

But it didn't work. The elf remained unscathed.

No matter how much mana Lakia poured into her spells, the elf simply looked back at her with a calm expression.

Lakia started to feel uneasy. She began to doubt her magic skills.

Could it be that she was weak? Her mother had told her she was ready to live independently, but perhaps she wasn't prepared yet?

'No!'

Lakia shook off the thought.

There was no way that could be true.

Dragons are the strongest beings on earth.

They don't need to be "prepared."

And besides, her opponent was just an elf. Not even a demon.

Her mother had warned her not to bully elves after becoming independent.

Elves love nature and are the most loyal of all races to dragons.

They even live long like dragons, which is why her mother had advised her to choose elves as guardians to protect her lair.

Feeling uneasy about an elf was something Lakia didn't want to acknowledge.

"Hey!"

Lakia lost her composure and shouted.

"Come at me properly, elf!"

The elf, who had been quietly observing Lakia, nodded.

And in the next moment, disappeared.

"???"

Lakia's eyes widened as she looked around in confusion.

The elf had been standing right in front of her, but suddenly vanished. What on earth happened?

It seemed like magic.

But there was no trace of a spell being cast.

Dragons are highly sensitive to mana, so if any magic had been used, she would have detected it.

While Lakia was bewildered, someone tapped her on the shoulder from behind.

“Eek!”

Lakia jumped in shock and turned around, only to find the elf standing there.

Still with that expressionless face.

Lakia hurriedly tried to cast a spell.

But before she could, the elf reached out and lightly flicked her forehead with a finger.

Smack!

Lakia fell backward from the impact to her forehead.

“Ugh, ah... ow.”

Her head felt like it was spinning as if her brain had been rattled. The world around her swirled.

For the first time in her life, Lakia experienced pain so intense her vision blurred, and her nose tingled.

‘N-no...’

She was on the verge of crying.

But there was no way a dragon would cry after being hit by an elf.

Lakia bit back her tears and glared at the elf.

The fight wasn't over yet.

She still had plenty of powerful spells left.

According to her mother, nothing could survive being hit by a dragon's magic.

So...

“Giga Thunder!”

A powerful lightning bolt crashed through the temple ceiling and struck the elf.

“Explosion!”

The spot where the elf stood erupted in an explosion.

“Meteor Strike!”

A meteor fell from the sky.

“Huff... huff...”

After casting multiple high-level spells, Lakia was completely exhausted and collapsed to the ground.

The temple had been reduced to rubble, no longer recognizable as a building.

“D-did I get them...?”

Lakia muttered as she gazed at the spot where the elf had been standing.

Dust filled the air, making it impossible to see.

But she couldn't sense any presence, so it seemed she had finally defeated them.

“Phew.”

Lakia let out a sigh of relief. Her forehead still hurt from the elf's flick, but she had won in the end.

Her magic prowess was undeniably impressive.

“Serves you right for acting up.”

Lakia grinned smugly, feeling proud again.

Though her lair had been destroyed, it couldn't be helped.

The battle had been fierce, after all.

But in the end, she won, and that was all that mattered.

Lakia stood up and brushed off her skirt.

“I can always find a new lair... eek!”

She screamed and collapsed to the side.

Someone had appeared next to her without her noticing.

It was the elf.

“You, you...!”

Lakia stammered, unable to form coherent words.

The elf was completely unharmed. Not a speck of dust on them.

Even the elf's companions were unscathed.

A blue barrier had formed around them.

The only things left in ruins were the temple Lakia had claimed as her lair and her own mana reserves.

Lakia no longer had the strength to stand. She couldn't even muster the energy to flee.

Step. Step.

The elf approached and knelt in front of her.

Their eyes met again.

The elf's gaze remained as calm as ever, but Lakia was different.

Her eyes were now filled with fear.

The fear of death.

“P-please... spare me... I'm sorry... I was wrong...”

Lakia begged pathetically.

Her dragon pride no longer mattered in the face of death.

Before death, all beings are equal.

Lakia didn't want to die. Dragons, with their long lifespans, have a strong attachment to life.

“I-I'll be your servant... Please, elf... have mercy...”

The elf slowly reached out, and Lakia trembled, squeezing her eyes shut.

Soon, there was a sharp sound.

Smack!

The elf flicked Lakia's forehead again.

“Ow!”

Lakia tumbled backward once more.

Her white forehead now swollen red.

“Ow, ow, it hurts!”

Lakia rubbed her forehead as she sat up.

Meanwhile, the elf had already started walking back to their companions.

Fortunately, it seemed that was the end of it. The elf had spared her life.

It was humiliating for a dragon to lose to an elf, let alone beg for their life.

Other dragons might have been so humiliated that they would end their own lives.

But strangely, Lakia didn't feel humiliated.

She simply watched the elf's retreating figure with a complicated, puzzled look in her eyes.

Chapter 33 : Dragon (3)

Tap. Tap.

Ariel walked over to where the others were and deactivated her shield.

Ghost immediately wagged his tail in greeting, but Mitchell and Jenny were standing there awkwardly, unsure of how to react.

The two of them didn't know what to make of the situation—dragons, powerful magic, and Ariel, completely unharmed by any of it. There were too many things to process.

Of course, Ariel didn't care what kind of reaction Mitchell or Jenny had. She just calmly petted Ghost.

“Ariel...”

Jenny was the first to speak.

“Are you okay...?”

Ariel gave a small nod in response to Jenny's question. Seeing that, Jenny forced a smile.

“That's a relief. You're really strong, Ariel.”

Jenny felt embarrassed inside. Earlier that morning, she had been boasting about handling a mere troll and confidently declaring that she would protect Ariel. Now, that seemed laughable.

Ariel had subdued a dragon with just a snap of her fingers.

Could anyone in the empire even match that kind of strength? Even Sir William, the Sword Saint, and Duke Rygar, the grand magician, together would not stand a chance against a dragon.

If that high-level magic the dragon cast had landed on the imperial capital, the empire would have suffered irreparable damage.

Ariel, who had taken that magic head-on and emerged completely unscathed, was beyond what Jenny could even imagine.

“Hmmm...”

Jenny quietly surveyed the surroundings.

The temple, which had seemed indestructible even after hundreds of years, was completely destroyed. In fact, calling it a temple at this point felt wrong—it was now just a pile of rubble.

The only part left intact was the spot where Ariel had activated her shield. The rest of the land around them was charred and blown up, resembling a brutal warzone.

“Um, excuse me...”

Picking her way across the unscorched parts of the ground, Lakia hopped over and approached Ariel.

“M-May I know your name?”

Lakia’s face was full of admiration as she gazed at Ariel.

In truth, Lakia was in awe of Ariel. Not only had Ariel, an elf, overpowered a dragon like herself, but she had also shown mercy by sparing her life in the end.

‘I have so much to learn from her...’

Fighting Ariel had made Lakia painfully aware of her own shortcomings.

Her mother had been wrong when she said that no one in this world could stand against a dragon.

Someone like Ariel existed.

‘I’m not ready yet.’

Ariel had shown mercy this time, but Lakia had no guarantee her next opponent would do the same. If her next enemy had a cruel nature like a demon, they would have no reason to spare her.

‘I need more training.’

Lakia wanted to live for a long time. To do that, she had to become strong enough to fend off anyone who dared to invade her lair.

“Ariel.”

When Ariel told her name, Lakia nodded with an exaggerated motion.

“Ariel...! I’m Lakia. D-Do you remember what I said earlier? That I wanted to become your subordinate...”

Lakia’s face turned red as she fidgeted with her fingers.

It was a little embarrassing for a dragon to offer to be an elf’s subordinate, but she was determined.

Somehow, she wanted to be Ariel’s follower. If she followed Ariel and learned from her, she would eventually become strong enough to defend her own lair.

Ariel looked at Lakia in silence.

To Ariel, having a subordinate wasn’t particularly necessary. She didn’t even remember Lakia making such an offer.

“P-Please!”

Seeing Ariel’s lack of response, Lakia grew anxious and threw herself flat on the ground.

“Please make me your subordinate, Ariel! I’m still an inexperienced dragon, but I’ll do my best to be of help to you!”

Ariel’s eyes widened.

‘A dragon...?’

No matter how she looked at Lakia, she appeared to be a human

child.

Ariel had suspected that Lakia was no ordinary being when she used such powerful magic earlier, but she never imagined that Lakia was a dragon.

Ariel hadn't realized it until now.

'A dragon...!'

A faint smile appeared on Ariel's lips.

Looking at Lakia now, it was hard to imagine, but if she was a dragon, her true form would certainly be a giant creature with wings.

Which meant...

'I can ride her.'

Ariel crouched down and took Lakia's hands.

"Alright."

Lakia looked up at Ariel with tear-filled eyes.

"Thank you... Ariel... Sniff, sniff...!"

In the end, Lakia burst into tears.

Meanwhile, Mitchell and Jenny had decided it was time to leave.

The abandoned temple had been completely destroyed, and Mitchell's mission to investigate the place was now over.

Ariel would soon head to the Dwarf Mountains in the west, and Mitchell and Jenny would retrace their steps back the way they came.

Since their paths were now different, there was no need to travel together anymore.

"Well, take care, Ariel. I hope we meet again someday."

“Ariel, I hope fate brings us together again.”

Ariel quietly waved at Mitchell and Jenny, who were speaking with a hint of sadness.

Would they meet again?

Perhaps. In their ongoing adventures, there was always the chance their paths would cross once more.

Even if they didn't, the time they spent together would remain a small, cherished memory.

“Goodbye.”

Ariel softly murmured and turned her body.

Ghost and Lakia followed behind her, while Mitchell and Jenny stood, smiling, as they watched Ariel walk away.

Once Ariel's figure had completely disappeared, Mitchell spoke.

“A lot happened in such a short time...”

“Yeah... Seeing a dragon... It's the first time since I saw one flying in the distance as a child.”

“Same here. Even though it looked like a human child, its magical power was unmatched. The stories of dragons turning a kingdom to ashes in a single day weren't exaggerations.”

“I thought the world was ending. If not for Ariel's shield, there wouldn't even be bodies left.”

“Forget the dragon... What is Ariel, really?”

“...”

Mitchell and Jenny fell silent, lost in thought.

“Let's just say... she's an incredibly powerful elf.”

“Yeah....”

An elf strong enough to overpower a dragon. They couldn't think of a better way to describe her.

"In any case, I'll never forget Ariel. Those soft cheeks, and how adorable she was when she got embarrassed during bath time... I really want to see her again."

Jenny began walking, and Mitchell quietly chuckled as he followed behind.

"You'll meet her again someday."

The two walked in the opposite direction from where Ariel had gone.

Meanwhile, Lakia spoke up again.

"So, Ariel, you're on an adventure. I'm really thankful that you've allowed me to join you. I'll do my best."

"Do your best..."

Ariel quietly repeated Lakia's last words.

Did one really need to "do their best" on an adventure? Shouldn't they just enjoy it?

"Well, Ghost, let's get along from now on. I may be a dragon, and you're just a wolf, but I won't underestimate you. We're comrades now, so we'll rely on each other. Oh, can I pet you just once? Wow, you're so soft. You're amazing."

As Ariel watched Lakia happily petting Ghost, she had the feeling that she was forgetting something.

Wasn't their group bigger than this?

'Ah.'

Ariel suddenly stopped in her tracks.

She had been feeling like something was missing for a while—Lu wasn't with them.

“What’s wrong, Ariel?”

“...Lu is missing.”

“Lu? Who’s that... Oh, right! Wasn’t there a fairy with us?”

Ariel quickly turned and looked back down the path they had come.

In the distance, a sparkling creature could be seen flying quickly toward them.

“Nuniiiim!!”

It was Lu.

“How could you leave me behind!!”

Lu zoomed over at the speed of light and clung to Ariel’s face.

“You’re so mean!”

Ariel turned back around and started walking again. She had almost forgotten, but since Lu had found her, they could keep going.

Lu started talking.

“Did Mitchell and Jenny leave? More importantly, that human woman we met at the temple! She wasn’t human at all. That was definitely dragon fear! Oh my gosh, a dragon! When I woke up and saw the destruction around us, I was so worried. I thought something might have happened to you, but seeing you’re fine... That dragon must have...”

Lu suddenly stopped talking and stared at Lakia.

Lu’s face turned pale as Lakia smiled at her.

“Starting today, I’ll be serving Ariel. I’ve become her subordinate.”

“H-Huh...?”

Lu looked absolutely shocked.

Ariel might be strong, but her opponent was a dragon.

A dragon becoming an elf's subordinate? Lu had never heard of such a thing.

"Your name is Lu, right? I'm Lakia. Let's get along from now on."

As Lakia cheerfully extended her hand, Lu didn't know how to respond.

But she couldn't just ignore a dragon's outstretched hand.

Finally, Lu nervously approached and shook hands.

"P-Please take care of me, D-Dragon..."

"Call me Lakia. We're comrades now, after all."

"R-Rakia..."

Normally, dragons are incredibly arrogant creatures.

They are the most powerful beings in the world—absolute entities.

When other races invade their lairs, dragons turn them to ashes without hesitation.

Yet here was a dragon acting so friendly. Lu couldn't help but be deep in thought.

Was Ariel the amazing one, or was this dragon just unusual?

No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't find a clear answer.

Chapter 34 : Ted (1)

“That’s peculiar...”

Lu muttered to herself, folding her arms.

In front of her were three different beings peacefully sleeping together—Ariel, Lakia, and Ghost, all cuddled up.

A satisfied smile spread across Lu’s face as she watched them.

Even though the morning had already arrived, Lu refrained from waking them up. It wasn’t every day you saw an elf, a dragon, and a wolf sleeping together like this.

“Hehe, they’re all sleeping so well.”

The first to wake was Ariel. She slowly opened her eyes and sat up.

“Oh, you’re awake, Sister?” Lu asked, and Ariel nodded sleepily.

She glanced at Ghost and Lakia, who were still wrapped in her arms.

Ghost stirred, opening his eyes slightly, while Lakia remained fast asleep, unaware of the world around her.

“I think it’s time to wake up Lakia too,” Lu suggested.

Ariel quietly reached out and poked Lakia’s cheek with her finger.

Lakia frowned and mumbled, “Mom...”

Lu couldn’t help but stifle a laugh at the sight.

“Hehe, a dragon calling for her mom?”

Poke. Poke poke.

As Ariel continued to poke Lakia's cheek, Lakia finally opened her eyes, slowly waking up.

"Mom...?"

For a moment, Lakia stared blankly at Ariel.

Then, with a sudden realization, she jolted upright.

"Ariel!"

Sitting up quickly, Lakia adjusted her posture. Her elegant frilly dress had come loose, slipping off one shoulder, and her once pristine blonde hair now looked like a bird's nest.

She was a mess.

It seemed she had been rolling around in her sleep.

"D-Did you sleep well...?"

Lakia's face flushed red, recalling how she had called Ariel "Mom" in her half-asleep state.

She had only recently left her mother's side, and the habit had slipped out unconsciously.

Luckily, Ariel didn't seem to care. She simply stretched and deactivated the shield she had set up the night before.

Screeech!

Immediately, three orcs charged toward them. They had been waiting outside the shield all night.

It was a daily occurrence by now, something they had gotten used to.

"Explosion!"

Lakia cast a spell.

Boom!

A powerful explosion engulfed the area.

Moments later...

“I-I’m sorry...”

Lakia hung her head in shame, repeatedly bowing to Ariel.

She had acted too hastily. Using such an excessive spell to deal with just three orcs was unnecessary.

The surrounding area had been completely devastated.

It wasn’t as bad as the disaster that had occurred at the temple, but the ground was riddled with craters, and a thick cloud of dust hung in the air.

In the end, they decided to move to a different spot for breakfast.

After all, the three exploded orcs were now scattered in pieces across the area.

No one wanted to eat in such a grim setting.

Feeling down about her mistake, Lakia grew sullen, and Lu tried to comfort her.

“It’s alright, Lakia. Sometimes things like that happen when you try hard.”

Lu gently brushed Lakia’s messy hair and straightened her clothes.

At first, Lu had been intimidated by Lakia, but now she felt more comfortable talking to her.

After a few conversations, Lu realized that Lakia wasn’t all that different from anyone else.

“It’s not alright... Ariel must be so disappointed in me... I’m such an inadequate dragon...”

“Sister doesn’t care about small things like that. Don’t worry too much. You can do better next time.”

“I’m not confident...”

Lu looked at Lakia with a complicated expression.

It was strange to hear a dragon, of all beings, express a lack of confidence.

Lakia’s magic had indeed been a bit excessive for the situation, but its power was undeniable.

Not many on the continent could cast such a powerful spell so effortlessly.

If anyone else had that kind of power, they would be hailed as a Grand Magician.

“Lakia, you really should have more confidence in yourself—”

Thud!

Suddenly, a sound interrupted Lu. She looked ahead and saw a boy standing by a large tree, breathing heavily while holding a wooden sword.

The sound they had heard was the boy hitting the tree with the sword.

Thud!

“Seven!”

The boy counted aloud as he continued to strike the tree with the wooden sword.

It seemed like he was practicing swordsmanship, but his form was clumsy.

To make matters worse, he was so skinny that even holding the wooden sword looked like a struggle for him.

Thud!

“Eight! Huh...?”

The boy's eyes widened when he noticed Ariel's group.

"Who are you...? A-Ah!"

He spotted Ghost and immediately fell back in fear, landing on the ground with a thud.

The wooden sword slipped from his hand and rolled across the ground.

"W-Wolf!"

The boy cried out with a pale face, but Ghost didn't react at all.

He simply looked at the boy with indifferent eyes, as if the boy wasn't worth reacting to.

Lu stepped forward and spoke.

"There's no need to be scared. Ghost doesn't harm people for no reason. But what are you doing out here, kid? Why are you hitting that poor tree?"

The boy frowned at Lu's words.

"Can't you tell? I'm training. And who are you calling a kid? You're tiny yourself."

"That's because I'm a fairy."

Lu responded calmly, and the boy, still sulking, picked up his wooden sword.

"Whatever. Just leave me alone. I need to keep practicing."

"Alright then."

Lu answered nonchalantly, and Ariel and Lakia, who had no interest in the boy, continued walking.

After passing the boy, Ariel's group soon found a peaceful spot by a cool waterfall.

Their faces lit up with joy.

“Wow, this is the perfect spot for breakfast!” Lu exclaimed.

Ariel settled down on a rock, and from her inventory, she pulled out a variety of food, including jerky and desserts.

Ariel seemed quite pleased as she started eating the desserts, but the rest of the group was less enthusiastic.

Lu had grown tired of jerky and desserts and was now just sipping on fruit wine.

Lakia and Ghost were reluctantly gnawing on jerky.

Being a dragon and a wolf, they both preferred fresh meat over dried jerky.

Of course, they couldn't exactly complain to Ariel about it.

Screech!

Suddenly, a distant scream echoed, and birds scattered into the sky.

Moments later, someone came rushing toward them in a panic.

“S-Someone help me!”

It was the boy with the wooden sword.

Two large boars were chasing after him.

Ariel calmly continued eating her dessert, but Lakia wasn't about to ignore the situation.

Lakia's eyes sparkled as she stared at the boars.

They looked plump and delicious.

“Ariel, may I help that human boy?”

Ariel nodded in response. There was no reason to refuse.

“Hehehe.”

Lakia licked her lips and got up, striding toward the boy and the boars.

Ghost, after glancing at Ariel, quietly followed Lakia.

“This time, I won’t go overboard...’

Lakia reminded herself as she watched the boars chase after the boy.

Ghost moved to stand beside her.

“Ghost, do you want to take one of them?”

Ghost nodded in response.

“Alright, let’s each handle one.”

Lakia extended her hand, and Ghost crouched low, ready to pounce.

“Move, move! It’s dangerous!!” the boy shouted frantically, but neither Lakia nor Ghost moved an inch.

As the boars drew closer, Lakia whispered a spell, and Ghost leaped forward.

“Wind Cutter.”

Slash!

Lakia’s magic sliced one of the boars clean in half.

The other boar fell to the ground, its throat ripped out by Ghost.

“Huff... huff...”

The boy collapsed, drenched in sweat, his legs giving out at the sight of the dead boars.

“A-Amazing...”

He muttered in awe, staring in disbelief.

“They’re so strong...”

No one paid any attention to his compliments.

Lakia happily approached the boars, while Ghost had already started tearing into one.

“Time to eat~” Lakia said cheerfully, opening her mouth wide to bite into the boar.

But before she could, the boy approached and asked, “Wait, are you really going to eat it just like that?”

He had started calling her “sister” now.

From his perspective, she had saved his life and wielded incredible magic, so calling her “sister” felt natural.

Besides, she only looked a year or two older than him.

“Why?” Lakia asked, eyeing him with suspicion.

She protectively hid the boar’s body behind her slim arms, though they were far too small to actually conceal it.

“If you’re going to eat it, you should cook it first.”

“Why bother? I’ll just eat it raw.”

“You shouldn’t eat it raw. If you cook it, it’ll taste better and you won’t get sick. I even have some spices with me, so I can cook it for you.”

The boy walked over and began skillfully preparing the boar.

“By the way, my name’s Ted,” he said, casually introducing himself.

Chapter 35 : Ted (2)

Ted's cooking skills were exceptional.

He roasted the wild boar that Lakia had caught to a golden crisp, seasoning it with just the right spices, and soon, a delicious dish was ready.

Ariel, who had been nibbling on desserts while sitting on a rock, and Lu, who had been sipping fruit wine, couldn't resist the smell and slowly approached the boar.

"Oh, Ariel, please try this first," Lakia said, tearing off a piece of the boar and offering it to Ariel.

The meat was still steaming hot, but Lakia held it effortlessly with her bare hands. After all, simple cooked meat wasn't nearly enough to harm a dragon.

Ariel opened her mouth and accepted the boar meat that Lakia handed to her.

Chewing thoughtfully, Ariel gave her verdict.

"How is it?"

"It's delicious."

This time, Ariel tore off a piece of boar meat and fed it to Lakia.

"Wow, it's so good!"

Ted, watching the two of them, smiled contentedly.

"Of course it's good. I made it," he said with pride.

Ted even took the raw boar meat that Ghost had been gnawing on

and prepared it the same way, ensuring that Ariel's group had a hearty breakfast.

"Ah, I'm stuffed," Lu said, patting her now full belly as she lay down in the grass.

The soft sunlight, the gentle breeze, and the sound of the nearby waterfall made it the perfect weather for a nap.

"Uh, sister..."

Ted approached Lakia nervously.

"About that magic earlier..."

"Magic?"

"The spell you used to kill the boar... Can you teach me?"

Lakia stared at Ted quietly.

A mere human asking a dragon to teach him magic—how audacious.

In the past, Lakia might have summoned a pillar of fire beneath Ted for such insolence. But after her fight with Ariel, she had learned her place.

"No."

Instead, she coldly rejected his request.

"Why not?" Ted wasn't ready to give up.

"Please, if you teach me that spell, I'll do whatever you want. I can roast boar for you every day."

"No."

"Why? What's the reason?"

"I just don't want to."

Lakia stood up and walked toward the stream, signaling that she

didn't want to continue the conversation.

Ted, dejected, turned his eyes to Ariel.

"Elven sister... are you a mage too?"

Ariel nodded.

"Wow, so can you use powerful magic like her?"

Ariel shook her head. The only spells she knew were Magic Missile and Shield.

Ted's face fell in disappointment.

"I see... Well, magic isn't easy, after all. But I really want to learn... I need to become stronger..."

Ted's words hinted at a deeper story.

"If I don't, I won't be able to get revenge on those guys or protect my village... Our village is in danger... huh?"

Ted trailed off, realizing that Ariel wasn't even listening—she was dozing off.

Meanwhile, Lakia sat by the stream, staring at the waterfall in silence.

"How dare a human ask a dragon to teach him magic..."

If Lakia were any other dragon, Ted would have been turned to ashes by now.

A mere human seeking to learn magic from a dragon was unthinkable.

Yet Lakia couldn't bring herself to feel that angry.

The boar that Ted had roasted was incredibly delicious, and honestly, if he cooked like that every day, Lakia might consider teaching him a simple spell.

But the problem was...

How would I even teach him?

Dragons don't learn magic; they're born with it. It's as natural as breathing to them.

So how could she possibly teach someone else?

That was the real reason Lakia had turned Ted down—not because she didn't want to, but because she didn't know how.

But admitting that hurt her pride, which was why she had distanced herself from Ted.

"Sister..."

Ted approached her again, looking apologetic.

"I'm sorry. It was wrong of me to ask such a big favor when we just met. You saved my life, and then I had the nerve to ask you to teach me magic. You had every right to be mad."

Lakia didn't respond. She wasn't actually angry—she just didn't know what to say.

"Please don't be upset. I'm not usually this shameless, but things aren't going well, and I guess I got desperate... By the way, where are you headed? If you're not too busy, would you like to visit our village? I can make you dinner. It won't be like the roast boar earlier, but I could whip up a simple stew."

"Stew?"

Lakia glanced at Ted.

"What's stew?"

"You don't know what stew is...?"

"I do!"

Lakia snapped, frowning, but Ted was convinced that she had no idea

what stew was.

“Stew is a dish where you cook meat and vegetables together, like a soup. Right now, our village is short on meat, so it’ll mostly be vegetables, but it’ll still taste good. I used to want to be a chef, you know.”

“Soup-like dish...?”

Lakia licked her lips.

“I want to try it.”

“Right? So, how about we head to my village?”

“Alright.”

Lakia smiled and nodded, but then quickly averted her gaze as she remembered something.

“But I need to ask Ariel first.”

“Ariel? You mean the silver-haired elf?”

“Yeah. I’m Ariel’s subordinate.”

“...”

Ted’s expression grew complicated.

To Ted, Lakia looked like a high-ranking noble.

Her dress was elegant, her golden hair and eyes gleamed, and her skin was pale and flawless—she had the appearance of someone who would ride in a carriage led by knights and attend grand balls.

And the magic she used earlier...

Magic wasn’t something commoners could learn. Before even considering talent, it took a lot of money to hire a tutor or attend a magical academy.

In every way, Lakia looked like someone with wealth and status, yet

she called herself a subordinate to an elf?

Ted wasn't well-versed in the ways of the world, but something about this seemed off.

In the end, it was decided that they would go to Ted's village.

Since Ariel was asleep, Lakia made the decision on her behalf, but it didn't really matter.

Ted's village wasn't far, and it wasn't in the opposite direction of the Dwarf Mountains.

Lakia climbed onto Ghost's back, carefully placing the sleeping Ariel in front of her and holding her securely to prevent her from falling.

"Our village used to be a great place to live. There were hardly any monsters around here, and since we weren't part of any lord's territory, we didn't have to pay taxes."

As they walked, Ted began to tell his story.

"At first, it was just a few wandering hunters who built some huts here, but eventually more people started moving in, and the village grew. That first hunter became the village chief—my grandpa."

No one was listening.

Lakia was too busy sneaking glances at Ariel's sleeping face, and Lu, who was tipsy from the fruit wine, lay sprawled on Lakia's lap.

Still, Ted continued his story with determination.

"After Grandpa passed, my dad became the chief. Not that being the chief meant much—he just made important decisions for the village. I always dreamed of leaving the village to become a chef. I wanted to see the world instead of staying in the countryside. Plus, my brother was going to be the next chief, not me..."

Finally, Ted's village came into view.

Compared to Herrington Village, which Ariel and Lu had visited

before, this place was poorly guarded.

There was a simple wooden fence, but it wasn't very tall, and the only person guarding the entrance was an elderly man.

Ted greeted him as they approached.

"Hello, Grandpa."

"Oh... Ben, is that you...?"

"It's Ted, not Ben. Ben's my brother."

"Ah, Ben... Where did you find that dog...?"

The old man pointed at Ghost.

"That's a very big, impressive dog... Someone might mistake it for a wolf... Hehe..."

"It is a wolf. Anyway, take care, Grandpa."

"Alright..."

After passing through the gate, Ted led them to his house.

It was the largest house in the village, situated at the edge, but while it was big, it wasn't particularly luxurious.

"The wolf can stay in the stable. It's empty right now since those guys took all our livestock..."

Ted's voice wavered with emotion, but no one was paying attention.

"This is your house?" Lakia asked.

Ted nodded.

"Yeah, Grandpa built it himself. It was just a hut at first, but we expanded it bit by bit, and now it's this big."

He seemed a little proud that his house was the biggest in the village.

“It’s shabby.”

Lakia muttered quietly.

She didn’t mean to offend Ted; it was just that, by dragon standards, the house did seem small and shabby.

“Well, uh... come on in.”

Ted awkwardly opened the door for them.

“There’s no one home right now. My brother won’t be back until late.”

“Okay.”

Lakia climbed down from Ghost, stuffed Lu into the pocket of her dress, and carefully carried the still-sleeping Ariel inside.

“...Ted.”

Someone was inside.

“Who’s that girl?”

It was Ted’s older brother, Ben.

Chapter 36 : Barbarians (1)

“W-What? Why are you home at this hour?”

Ted asked with a flustered expression.

Ted’s older brother, Ben, usually isn’t home at this time.

It’s because he goes out to the fields early every morning and returns late at night.

“I just stopped by for a bit. But more importantly, Ted, who is this girl?”

“A, a friend.”

“A friend?”

Ben looked at Lakia after hearing Ted’s answer.

A girl holding a younger child, about her age, in her arms.

Dressed in an elegant gown, with golden hair and eyes that glistened.

Her skin was pale, and her face was beautiful.

Just as Ted had thought, Ben also assumed Lakia was a high-ranking noble.

“...Where did you meet her?”

“In the forest.”

“The forest? Did you go out for that training or whatever again? You idiot.”

At Ben’s words, Ted lowered his head in shame.

Ben sighed softly and said,

“Anyway, send her back. Outsiders aren’t allowed in our village.”

“Brother....”

“Send her back.”

“N-No. I invited her for dinner. She helped me....”

Whack!

Ben swung his fist and struck Ted across the face.

Ted collapsed onto the floor, but Ben paid no mind and said,

“Do you not understand how dangerous the situation in the village is right now? When will you ever grow up?”

Ben glanced at Lakia again.

“Sorry for showing you this. My foolish brother must have invited you without thinking, but our village doesn’t allow outsiders.

So please leave immediately.”

“But I was going to prepare a stew....”

“Our village is in danger. If they come....”

Knock knock.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

“Ben, they’re here! Everyone’s being called to the square!”

Ben’s eyes widened, and Ted, equally surprised, lifted his head.

“Ted, stay in the house. Understand? Do not come out.”

“Y-Yes.”

Ben quickly rushed out, and Ted locked the door behind him.

Click.

“It’ll, it’ll be fine... As long as we stay inside, we’re safe. They won’t come into the house....”

Ted muttered, clearly anxious.

Lakia tilted her head.

“They?”

“Those barbarians... It looks like they’ve come to the village.”

After leaving the house, Ben hurried to the village square.

Although it was called a square, it was just an empty lot near the village’s stockade, given how small the village was.

When he arrived, the villagers had already gathered.

Everyone, both adults and children, were kneeling on the ground.

And standing before them were about a dozen burly men, looking down at the villagers.

The man standing in the middle, with a long scar down one cheek, glanced at Ben.

Ben quickly knelt before the man.

“I-I’m sorry I’m late....”

“If you’re sorry, you deserve a beating.”

Thud!

The man’s boot struck Ben’s face.

Though Ben fell backward, he quickly picked himself up and knelt again.

The man asked,

“Anything unusual in the village?”

“No, nothing....”

“Is that so? How’s the farming going?”

“We’re working hard.”

“Working hard isn’t important. The harvest is what matters. You know what happens if the harvest doesn’t please me, right? I’ll boil every one of you alive. Hahaha!”

Though the man laughed as he spoke, Ben’s face turned pale at the thought that these men were truly capable of such horrors.

“I-I’ll do my best.”

“You better.”

The man patted Ben’s shoulder with his large hand.

“Otherwise, you’ll end up dead like your father.”

Ben quietly bit his lip.

Ben’s father had been the village chief.

He was a diligent and kind man, respected by the villagers for his leadership.

He was also a loving father who cherished Ben and Ted.

But his father was killed. Beheaded by the very man standing in front of Ben now.

Ben could never forgive this man. In his heart, he wanted to attack him right then and there to avenge his father.

But of course, doing so would only result in Ben’s death.

This man was a barbarian.

Even if all the villagers attacked him at once, they wouldn’t stand a

chance.

Fighting would only lead to the kind of senseless death the man mocked.

If that happened, Ted wouldn't survive either.

Ted was still too young to fend for himself, and the barbarians wouldn't leave him alone.

When they first attacked the village, they had intended to eat all the children.

Ben's father had fought them off with farming tools to protect the children, but when his father was killed, Ben knelt and begged for mercy.

He pleaded with them to spare the children. He promised to do whatever they wanted if only they would let the children live.

And so, Ben became a willing slave. Even when they took all the livestock, he didn't complain.

Instead, he worked the fields for them without a word of discontent.

He worked from dawn to dusk, surviving on just a few vegetables, but he had no choice.

Without a lord to protect them, the villagers had no choice but to bow and provide labor to survive.

"Hmm, by the way, why don't I see your little brother today?"

The barbarian man looked around.

There were a few children kneeling among the adults, but Ted was nowhere to be seen.

Ben hastily explained,

"M-My brother... He's not feeling well...."

"Is that so? That kid had a fiery look in his eyes. I liked him."

The man's lips curled into a long smirk.

"In fact, I'm looking forward to the day he tries to fight me. His face looks just like someone plotting revenge for his father. Hahaha!"

"He... He won't do such a thing...."

Ben forced a reply, but in truth, Ted was dreaming of revenge.

He had found a wooden sword somewhere and practiced swordsmanship in the forest every day.

Of course, there was no way Ted could ever defeat this barbarian.

"This won't do. Since I'm here, I might as well go see him. Hey, village chief's son, take me to your house."

Ben flinched at the barbarian's words.

Ted wasn't alone in the house.

That noble girl from earlier was there too.

Ben's face went pale.

'If they see her...?

There's no way they'd leave her alone.

They might kidnap her, or worse, eat her on the spot.'

"Hurry up!"

The barbarian kicked Ben when he hesitated.

"If you don't take me there, I'll start killing the village children one by one. Hahaha!"

In the end, Ben had no choice but to lead the barbarians to his house.

The door was locked from the inside. Ted must have locked it.

It was the right thing to do, but in this situation, it didn't mean much.

There was no way the barbarians would leave just because the door was locked. They would definitely break it down.

“Step aside, I’ll break the door.”

‘As expected.’

Ben stepped back, resigned.

He silently prayed that Ted had hidden the noble girl somewhere in the house.

If he hid her well, in a closet or something, maybe the barbarians wouldn’t find her.

“Chief! There’s something in the stable!”

Someone suddenly shouted.

The barbarian chief, who was about to kick the door, stopped and turned.

“Huh? What did you say is there?”

“It looks like a wolf... A really big one!”

“A wolf?”

The barbarian chief raised an eyebrow and began walking toward the stable.

“...What?”

Ben had no idea what was going on.

The barbarians had taken all the livestock, so the stable should have been empty.

“Oho!”

The barbarian chief exclaimed.

“It’s true! It’s enormous! This must be some kind of magical beast!

Hahaha!”

The barbarian chief laughed in satisfaction, drawing an axe from his belt.

“And its fur is silver! A cloak made from that wolf’s pelt would be perfect!”

The barbarian chief opened the stable door, and at that moment, a gigantic wolf leaped out.

“Good! A hunt!”

The barbarian chief shouted, and his men cheered in response.

“Yeah!”

“Get the wolf!”

For the barbarians, hunting was almost like a festival.

Especially when it was a large, strong beast like this, they couldn’t help but get excited.

“Raaaah!”

The barbarian chief charged at the wolf, swinging his axe toward its neck.

Whoosh!

The wolf lowered its body and dodged the axe. It then immediately swiped its front paw at the barbarian chief.

“Oh! As expected, it’s no ordinary beast!”

Despite his large frame, the barbarian chief moved swiftly, leaping into the air.

The wolf’s paw sliced through empty space.

“But in the end, it’s just an animal!”

The barbarian chief swung his axe down toward the wolf's head.

Other barbarians around him also brandished spears and swords, leaving the wolf with no escape.

'Is this the end...?'

Ben thought gloomily.

He didn't know why such a large wolf was in his stable, but he didn't want to see it die.

Especially not at the hands of these barbarians.

'Damn it.'

Ben quietly closed his eyes, expecting to hear the wolf's painful cries.

Bang!

But that wasn't the sound he heard.

...Huh?'

Ben opened his eyes again.

What he saw was an unbelievable sight.

A blue barrier had formed around the wolf, and standing next to it was a young girl.

Her silver hair glimmered, and her pointed ears stood out.

She was an elf.

Chapter 37 : Barbarians (2)

Ariel fell asleep right after eating the wild boar meat that Ted had cooked.

When she opened her eyes again, she found herself in an unfamiliar place.

It wasn't the first time this had happened.

The last time it occurred, she woke up on the floor of a prison, but this time, she was in a bed.

As Ariel sat up, she suddenly noticed someone lying next to her.

It was Lakia.

“Mmm, mom...”

Lakia was sound asleep.

Ariel carefully got out of bed, trying not to wake Lakia, and at that moment, she heard a commotion outside.

“Whoa!”

“Catch the wolf!”

At the mention of a wolf, Ariel's eyes widened.

Ariel looked out the window.

She saw Ghost surrounded by a group of men.

They were burly, rough-looking men.

One of them, a man with a scar on one cheek, swung an axe at Ghost.

Ghost crouched to dodge the axe, then swiped with his front paw, but the man easily jumped out of the way.

The man swung his axe again, and this time, the other men attacked Ghost all at once.

Without hesitation, Ariel leaped out the window.

She ran straight to Ghost's side and deployed a shield.

Clang!

The men's weapons clashed against Ariel's shield.

Depending on the level of the mage, normally a shield would be damaged by so many simultaneous attacks.

The mage's mana would evaporate, and the shield would shatter.

But Ariel's shield showed no sign of breaking.

It remained intact, maintaining its vivid blue color just as when it was first deployed.

"Ma-magic?!"

The men recoiled in shock as their attacks were blocked.

The barbarians were all skilled warriors, and their bodies usually reacted instinctively in situations like this.

"What? An elf?!"

"A young elf?"

The men murmured amongst themselves.

They looked toward their chief, the man with the scar on his cheek, unsure of what to do.

The chief, too, was quite taken aback.

He had aimed his axe at the wolf's head, but suddenly magic

appeared, and an elf showed up.

“Ha ha ha!”

Although surprised, the situation wasn't necessarily bad for the chief.

He had always dreamed of taking an elf as his bride.

There was no race as beautiful as elves on the surface of the earth. Barbarian women didn't appeal to him at all.

Of course, an elf would never give a barbarian like him a second glance.

Let alone meeting an elf, which in itself was a rare occurrence.

It was said that elves were sold as slaves in the Empire's cities, but even then, one would need money to buy one.

And barbarians had no money.

They were free spirits who hunted beasts in the fields and slept wherever they pleased.

That's why this chief was currently raiding villages on the Empire's western frontier with a dozen of his men.

To raise the funds to buy an elf slave.

Of course, his men had no idea about this.

They simply thought they were invading the Empire.

He had explained that this village was the first stepping stone in their conquest of the Empire.

If he had told them he wanted to buy an elf slave, they might have turned their axes on him immediately.

Of course, as a barbarian himself, the chief also longed to invade the Empire.

But you need a chance of victory to fight, and after suffering a

humiliating defeat in the past, he knew they would lose again if they fought.

While the barbarian tribe had many great warriors, the Empire had even more.

Terrifying figures like Shane of the North were just one example of the countless warriors the Empire had.

Barbarian men often accepted death in battle as a natural outcome, but not this chief.

He wanted to live a peaceful life, happily married to a beautiful elf bride.

He also wanted to have many children who resembled both him and his elf bride.

That's why he was diligently raiding villages to save money.

To marry a beautiful elf bride.

And now, an elf had appeared before him of her own accord.

The chief scanned Ariel with a broad grin.

She was still young, but not bad. Cute. When she grew up, she would surely become a great beauty.

Her shimmering silver hair and blood-red eyes were oddly captivating.

Even her emotionless face, which seemed to view the world with indifference, appeared charming in the chief's eyes.

“Capture that elf!”

The chief raised his axe high and shouted to his men.

“But don't hurt her! Anyone who harms her will lose their head!”

He couldn't bear to let his precious bride be harmed.

“You can kill the wolf, though!”

“But chief, she used magic!”

One of his men spoke up.

“Fighting a mage without hurting her is...”

“Shut up! Just attack all at once! Show them the pride of the barbarians!”

The pride of the barbarians.

It was like magic.

As soon as he said those words, his men let out a battle cry and bravely charged at any enemy, no matter who they were.

“Waaaah!”

Just like now.

The barbarian men rushed Ariel and Ghost all at once.

Even the bravest of warriors would feel tense in a situation like this.

When several hulking men attacked at once, anyone would feel intimidated.

Ariel was no exception. She glanced around, her face stiff.

With loud war cries, the men were charging toward her.

It was noisy. Overwhelming.

The men swung their weapons wildly at Ariel’s shield.

Bang! Bang!

Of course, the shield didn’t budge an inch.

Ariel’s mana was being consumed, but not enough to be noticeable.

The amount of mana she was using was as insignificant as a single drop of water evaporating from the ocean.

“Huh, it’s tough!”

“This is incredible!”

Even though the shield remained unscathed, the barbarian men didn’t give up.

Their faces turned red, and they were sweating profusely as they desperately struck Ariel’s shield.

As if they believed that, if they kept going, the shield would eventually break.

Ariel reached out her hand to cast a magic missile.

The sound of weapons crashing against her shield was annoying, and more importantly, these men had attacked Ghost.

She couldn’t let that slide.

But just then—

Crackle!

A blue lightning bolt flew through the air, sweeping across the surroundings.

The men who had been striking the shield were instantly electrocuted, their bodies convulsing before collapsing.

Smoke rose from their fallen bodies.

“How dare you....”

A chilling voice spoke.

“Who do you think you’re trying to touch, you lowly creatures?”

Lakia was approaching with her eyes wide open.

“What, what’s going on...?”

The chief looked around in horror.

Half of his dozen men had been killed in an instant.

They had been electrocuted and killed by a blue bolt of lightning while trying to break through the elf’s shield.

“C-Chief!”

Only five of his men remained, and they rushed to the chief with terror-stricken faces.

The chief turned his gaze to the elf.

No, to be precise, he looked at the blonde girl approaching the elf.

The blonde girl was clearly furious.

With a murderous expression, she stomped over the corpses of the men, heading toward the elf.

“Ariel, are you alright?”

But when she spoke to the elf, her voice was infinitely gentle and soft.

“I’m sorry. I must have fallen asleep. I’ll deal with these bugs.”

Whoosh!

Pillars of flame rose over the bodies of the men.

She was incinerating them.

‘Did I let my guard down...?’

The chief thought.

It wasn’t the elf who was the mage, but this blonde girl.

If he had known that, he would have been more cautious.

The blonde girl seemed to possess considerable magical power.

But that didn't mean she was unbeatable.

Mages, despite their powerful magic, had a clear weakness.

Without mana, they were helpless.

After using a strong spell, they would quickly lose their strength and become vulnerable.

He had witnessed this many times during the war with the Empire.

Surely, this girl was no different.

She had used lightning magic to kill half of his men and had even summoned pillars of flame, so she must have consumed a considerable amount of mana.

'Heh, foolish child. Must be because she's young.'

It seemed that in her rage, she had recklessly wasted her magic, which was fortunate for the chief.

Now, all he had to do was capture this girl as his second bride.

She also happened to be just his type.

"... Don't be afraid."

The chief spoke calmly to his remaining men.

"That blonde girl is the mage, but she's used up a lot of mana. If we attack now, we can win."

"But chief... I don't want to die...."

"Me neither... What if she can still use magic? We'll be fried to a crisp...."

The men were too scared to move.

The chief scowled and shouted.

“Move now!”

He had no choice but to say it again.

“Show them the pride of the barbarians!”

Chapter 38 : Barbarians (3)

The subordinates ultimately didn't move.

Instead of moving, they looked at the chief with eyes as if they were seeing a scammer.

"...So why isn't the chief going? Didn't you say you once caught a dragon with your axe? Then you should be able to handle a young mage like her...."

"Yeah. You also said you killed countless mages during the war."

"That's right, that's right."

'These bastards.....'

The chief ground his teeth inwardly.

Claiming to have caught a dragon with his axe was, of course, a boast, but he had fought mages a few times.

However, he had never killed one. He had always been too busy running away from their spells.

If the chief had seriously fought a mage, he wouldn't be alive today. He would have died during the war.

"Go right now! If not, I'll cut each of your throats...."

The chief stopped mid-sentence.

The blonde girl was already walking toward them, her steps slow and deliberate.

Her eyes radiated a murderous intent.

She was undoubtedly a young girl, but she felt incredibly menacing.

“H-Hiii! She’s coming!”

“D-Don’t be afraid...! She must be out of mana by now...!”

Though the chief said that, he had already taken several steps back.

The moment that girl used magic, he was ready to turn around and flee at full speed.

“You lowly creatures.”

The girl coldly spat out her words.

“For daring to touch Lady Ariel, pay with your lives.”

A magic circle appeared beneath the subordinates’ feet.

And then—

Boom!

A powerful explosion swept through the area.

“Ha, haah!”

The chief, who had been running at full speed, collapsed onto the bushes, barely able to breathe.

“Haah! Haah!”

His breathing was ragged.

Though he had fled quite far from the village, his body still trembled uncontrollably.

‘I almost died...!’

The moment the magic circle appeared beneath his subordinates’ feet, the chief had immediately turned and fled.

At the same time, a massive explosion erupted behind him.

Had he been even a moment slower, his body would have been torn to shreds.

It was pure luck that he had been standing a little further back from his subordinates.

All of his men were likely dead. They weren't strong enough to survive such an explosion.

"Heh."

The chief let out a dry laugh.

It was unfortunate to have encountered a mage girl while raiding the village, but at least he had survived.

No matter how powerful that girl was, there was no way she would follow him this far.

Barbarians were excellent runners.

They had been running through the plains and fields since childhood, so when it came to running, the chief was confident he wouldn't lose to that girl.

'Now then, where should I go?'

The chief wiped the sweat from his face and pondered.

He would have to give up raiding villages for now, as he had lost his subordinates.

No matter how skilled a warrior he was, it would be impossible to raid a village alone.

If all the villagers attacked at once, he wouldn't stand a chance by himself. Not to mention, the mage girl might still be around.

If he encountered that girl again, he wouldn't survive. The moment they crossed paths, he would join his dead subordinates.

'...I need to get as far away as possible.'

The chief struggled to his feet and began to move.

But soon, he came to an abrupt stop.

“?”

Something was standing in front of him.

A massive wolf with silver fur.

And riding on the wolf's back was a young elf girl with silver hair.

“!”

The chief felt his hair stand on end.

He had thought he had escaped far enough, but had he been caught?

Well, if they had come on a wolf, it made sense.

No matter how fast barbarians ran, they couldn't outrun a wolf.

‘Is this the end...?’

The chief's expression darkened.

‘Wait, hold on....’

But soon, his eyes narrowed as he glanced around.

The mage girl from earlier was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you...alone?”

The chief asked hopefully.

If the elf girl was alone, without the mage, he might have a chance.

The wolf wasn't a problem.

The chief had hunted beasts and monsters larger than this wolf before.

Even if he had fled and left his men behind, he was still a chief who led a tribe.

He was strong enough to handle a wolf of this size.

“I’m alone.”

The elf girl responded in a soft, almost whispering voice.

The chief’s lips curled into a long smile.

“I see. You’re alone.”

He drew his axe from his belt and immediately charged forward.

“Then I’ll finish this quickly!”

It felt as if the heavens were helping him.

The elf girl had come alone, without the mage. This was a perfect situation.

Though he had lost his subordinates, if he could take the elf girl as his bride, his future would be filled with joy.

Leap!

As the distance closed, the chief jumped high into the air.

Earlier, he had been careful not to harm the wolf, but now there was no time for that.

Even if he lost an arm, he had to end this in a single strike, before the mage girl arrived.

The chief swung his axe down with all his might.

Yet the wolf didn’t move. It simply stared blankly at the chief.

At this rate, the axe would shatter the wolf’s skull, killing it instantly.

“Heh, this is why animals...!”

Animals often froze like this when they were terrified.

They couldn't move, paralyzed by fear or shock.

It was the perfect moment for a kill.

"Die, wolf!"

The chief's axe sliced through the air, aimed at the wolf's crown.

At that moment, the chief locked eyes with the elf girl.

Her calm eyes were like a deep lake.

Without a trace of emotion, the elf girl quietly muttered,

"You're the one who will die."

Whoosh!

A blue light pierced through the chief's forehead.

When Ariel returned to the village riding Ghost, Lakia quickly approached.

"Lady Ariel! I've been waiting for you!"

Lakia smiled brightly at Ariel.

"I waited patiently, just like you told me!"

"....."

Ariel looked at Lakia and slowly reached out to pat her head.

Lakia had the expression of a child hoping for praise.

"Hehe."

Lakia squirmed happily, letting out a soft giggle.

A dragon enjoying having its head patted by an elf—if other dragons saw this, they would be pounding the ground in disbelief.

“Um....”

Someone spoke up from the side.

“Earlier, I’m sorry. I mean, I apologize. I only asked you to leave the village because I was afraid the barbarians might harm you. Please forgive me....”

It was Ben, Ted’s older brother.

Unlike earlier, Ben’s attitude had become extremely polite.

“And thank you...for dealing with those men....”

All the barbarians had been killed by Lakia’s magic. Their bodies had even been incinerated by Lakia, leaving no trace behind.

The chief had escaped, but Ariel had chased after him on her wolf, so he was surely dead by now.

The village was now free.

All thanks to Ariel and Lakia.

“Th-Thank you....”

“Thank you...!”

One by one, the villagers gathered and began to express their gratitude to Ariel and Lakia.

“Ah, move aside, will you...!”

A skinny boy squeezed through the crowd of villagers.

“Sisters!”

It was Ted.

“Sisters, you’re way stronger than I imagined! You were amazing!”

Ted was filled with excitement.

It was only natural to feel proud that the guests he had brought to the village had saved everyone.

Though he hadn't avenged his father with his own hands, it didn't matter.

Ted knew that no amount of practice with his wooden sword would have helped him defeat those men.

He had only trained to distract himself from the pain he couldn't bear.

"Sisters! As promised, I'll make you a delicious stew today. I'll do my best, so look forward to it! It's too bad there's no meat, though...."

All the village's livestock and food had been taken by the barbarians, so there was no meat left.

That's why not only Ted, but all the villagers, were skinny and frail. They had been surviving on just vegetables every day.

"Hmm, it really is a shame... If we had some meat, I could make it much tastier...."

As Ted muttered, Ariel opened her inventory.

Thud.

Three minotaurs fell out of Ariel's inventory.

"Ugh!"

The people gasped and stepped back, but soon realized the minotaurs were corpses and relaxed.

"Wh-What is this?"

Ted asked with a pale face, and Ariel calmly replied,

"Meat."

A slow smile spread across Ted's face.

The minotaurs were enormous, and they were fresh, as if just caught.
There would be enough meat to feed the entire village.

“Can I really use this for cooking?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you, elf sister! Tonight, we’re having beef stew!”

“Beef stew...”

Ariel quietly repeated the words and glanced at the minotaur corpses.

Chapter 39 : Dwarf Mountains

(1)

The beef stew Ted made was incredibly delicious.

At first, Ariel was a bit hesitant, thinking it was strange to eat a dish made from a monster's corpse, but after taking a small taste, she found herself finishing the bowl cleanly—it was that good.

Moreover, there was plenty of food for everyone in the village to eat their fill.

Thanks to this, the village had a joyous feast for the first time in a long while. Everyone, both adults and children, ate, drank, and enjoyed themselves to their heart's content.

After the feast, Ben and a few of the village's young men headed to where the barbarians had stayed and returned with the livestock and valuables that had been taken from them.

Recovering both the livestock and the treasure after the feast turned the village into a festive atmosphere.

Some villagers were even moved to tears of joy.

While it was good to celebrate, they also needed to prepare for the future. They were fortunate this time to have Ariel and Lakia's help, but there was no guarantee they would be so lucky next time.

They needed to come up with a plan in case something like this happened again.

Their plan involved reinforcing the village's stockade and forming a militia.

With Ben, who had taken over as village chief after their father, leading the discussion, a village meeting was held. Meanwhile, Ariel and her party decided it was time to leave the village.

“You’re heading to the Dwarf Mountains now, right?”

Ted came out to see them off at the village entrance.

“I wish I could go with you....”

Ted looked disappointed, but he knew he couldn’t follow Ariel’s party because he had to stay and help his brother run the village.

“Come visit our village again someday. Next time, I’ll treat you to even better food!”

“Alright.”

Lakia responded with a smile.

“But if it’s not delicious, I’ll burn the village to the ground.”

Lakia meant it as a joke, but Ted’s face turned pale.

“I-I’ll do my best....”

Having witnessed Lakia’s magic firsthand, it was an understandable reaction.

“Goodbye, sisters. I won’t forget you. Thank you so much!”

Ted waved his hand, and Ariel’s party started walking away.

It was much later that Lu finally woke up.

Lu had been sleeping in Lakia’s dress pocket, drunk on fruit wine, and woke up with a hangover. Stumbling out of Lakia’s pocket, he listened to what had happened in the village and became furious.

“They dared to touch Ghost and my lady?! Those scoundrels! If I had been awake, I wouldn’t have let them get away with it! I’d have twisted their limbs—”

Ariel took out some food from her inventory and handed it to Lu.

It was the beef stew Ted had made.

She had saved it in her inventory to give to Lu once he woke up.

“T-Thank you, my lady....”

Lu looked deeply moved.

“As expected, you’re the only one who truly cares about me. Let’s stay together forever.”

The beef stew, which had been stored in her inventory, was still warm.

Lu slurped it down as if it were a cure for his hangover.

“Ah... This stew, you said that skinny kid made it? It’s amazing. That wild boar meat was fantastic too. That kid’s cooking skills are no joke. With talent like that, he might be a good addition to our party....”

While Lu was muttering to himself, Lakia noticed someone staring at her and turned her head.

It was Ariel, who had been silently watching her. However, as soon as their eyes met, Ariel quickly looked away.

“...?”

Lakia tilted her head in confusion.

“Lady Ariel, is there something you’d like to say to me?”

“....”

Ariel fidgeted, not saying anything, as if she was hesitating about what to say.

“If there’s anything you want to say, feel free to speak at any time, Lady Ariel.”

Lakia spoke gently, and Ariel finally opened her mouth.

“I-I’d like to ride it once....”

“Ride what?”

Ariel’s cheeks turned red.

“The dragon...”

“Oh.”

Lakia’s eyes widened.

“You want to... ride me?”

“Yeah.”

Ariel nodded. She enjoyed riding Ghost, but she wanted to experience riding a dragon as well.

Flying through the night sky on a dragon seemed like it would be incredibly romantic.

“Of course, you can!”

Lakia replied casually.

“It’s no problem for me to carry you. You’re light.”

In truth, whether Ariel was light or not didn’t matter—dragons almost never let anyone ride on their backs.

If Ariel were to ride on Lakia’s back, she would probably be the first elf ever to ride a dragon.

“How about I fly you all the way to the Dwarf Mountains? We can bring Ghost and Lu too.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I’ll do anything you wish, Lady Ariel.”

At this, Lu's expression became complicated.

'Is this really okay...?'

It was one thing for Ghost and Lu to follow Ariel, but Lakia was a dragon, and here she was showing such blind loyalty.

'Somehow, this doesn't feel right....'

While Lu was having these thoughts, Ariel approached Lakia and patted her head.

"Thank you, Lakia."

"Hehe...."

A broad smile spread across Lakia's face. She looked incredibly happy.

"Well then."

Lakia began unbuttoning her dress. She had to take it off before transforming into her true form, or it would tear.

"I-It's a bit embarrassing. It's been a while since I've changed into my true form...."

Lakia's dress slipped to the ground.

Ariel had already turned her eyes away. Lu did the same.

"Polymorph, release."

Whoosh!

A vast amount of mana swirled around them.

Ariel, Lu, and Ghost could all feel it.

After a moment.

"I'm ready, Lady Ariel."

At Lakia's words, Ariel turned her gaze back.

Lakia's dress lay on the ground, and in front of them stood a giant dragon.

A dragon whose scales sparkled gold, just like Lakia's hair.

Not only Ariel, but Ghost and Lu were also mesmerized as they stared at Lakia.

She was majestic and awe-inspiring.

Any creature facing a dragon would likely feel the same way.

Lowering her body, Lakia said,

"Climb on, Lady Ariel."

"Okay."

With a delighted expression, Ariel climbed onto Lakia's back, followed by Ghost and Lu.

"Hold on tight."

With that, Lakia flapped her wings once.

Just one flap sent Lakia's massive body soaring into the sky.

Flying through the sky on a dragon felt like a dream.

Ariel happily watched the stars in the night sky and the ground far below.

It was a blissful moment that made her glad she had made a dragon her companion.

However, dragons were incredibly fast.

Even though Lakia was flying as slowly as possible, it didn't take long for them to reach the Dwarf Mountains. The mountains weren't that far away to begin with.

“We’ve arrived, Lady Ariel.”

Lakia said as she descended to the ground.

When Ariel looked up, she saw the enormous mountains shrouded in clouds.

It was the Dwarf Mountains.

“Dwarves...”

Ariel muttered quietly.

Though she was a little disappointed that she wouldn’t be riding the dragon anymore, the thought of finally meeting the dwarves filled her with excitement.

“Polymorph.”

After letting them off, Lakia transformed back into her human form and quickly put on her dress.

Honestly, as a dragon, she didn’t really need to wear clothes.

It’s not like she would catch a cold or damage her skin without them.

Still, Lakia wore clothes because of her mother’s advice.

When transforming into human form, you should always wear clothes, or else you might draw unnecessary attention and possibly feel embarrassed.

It was something like that.

Lakia didn’t really understand, but she dutifully followed her mother’s words.

After buttoning up her dress neatly, Lakia smiled at Ariel.

“All done, Lady Ariel.”

Ariel, who had turned her gaze away again, nodded and continued walking toward the Dwarf Mountains.

There were no guards or gates at the entrance to the Dwarf Mountains.

Because of this, even non-dwarves could enter freely.

Most of the people Ariel saw were humans. They were merchants or adventurers gathered to buy items crafted by the dwarves.

Dwarven craftsmanship was unmatched by humans, so trade between the two races was very active.

On the other hand, elves didn't get along well with dwarves, so they rarely visited the Dwarf Mountains.

It wasn't forbidden, but they simply disliked each other, so there was little interaction.

Despite this, a young elf now walked boldly into the Dwarf Mountains.

That elf was Ariel.

Ariel looked around in awe.

Dwarves here, dwarves there.

Since this was the Dwarf Mountains, dwarves were everywhere.

With their short legs, they scurried about, each heading purposefully to their destinations.

To the dwarves, this was just their normal day-to-day life, nothing special, but to Ariel, it was a delightful sight.

However, perhaps she was too distracted by her surroundings.

Thunk.

Ariel bumped into a dwarf walking in front of her.

The dwarf, who was carrying so many items that they blocked his view, also hadn't seen Ariel.

“Ah!”

The dwarf fell backward, spilling his items all over the ground.

Meanwhile, Ariel stood unfazed.

“Hey! Where are you looking when you’re walking? You dumb gi—”

The dwarf blinked his large eyes as he looked up at Ariel.

“W-Wait, an elf...?”

Chapter 40 : Dwarf Mountains

(2)

Dwarves dislike elves.

Whenever they try to mine for minerals, elves always seem to appear out of nowhere and lecture them about not destroying nature.

“Would you like it if someone hit you with a pickaxe? Have you ever thought about how much pain nature, which cannot speak, must be in?”

Of course, dwarves had never thought about that, nor did they care.

Dwarves don't assign any special meaning to nature. Nature is just nature.

“Stop making a fuss. Don't bother me while I'm working. Get lost.”

“What? Get lost? Are you picking a fight with me, you little dwarf runt?”

“What? Dwarf runt? Oh, you're asking for it. I'll cut off those pointy ears of yours.”

“Bring it on!”

And thus, the war between dwarves and elves began.

The war continued until the demon invasion, at which point the two races were forced to call a truce. However, that didn't mean they became friends.

Elves still hated dwarves for destroying nature, and dwarves hated elves for their fussiness and emotional outbursts.

But not all dwarves hated elves.

Right now, the dwarf standing in front of Ariel, Bagran, was different.

Bagran liked elves very much.

Elves were beautiful, right? So, a little nagging was fine. Because they were beautiful.

That was roughly how Bagran thought about it.

‘D-Damn it. I made a mistake. I didn’t know it was an elf...’

Bagran regretted it inside because just moments ago, he had bumped into Ariel and cursed at her.

He had stopped mid-sentence at “Hey! Where are you looking when you’re walking, you stupid girl...,” but it was too late.

Elves already disliked dwarves, and now that she had heard such rude words, Bagran was sure Ariel would hate him.

She might curse him or even spit in his face. Bagran was ready to accept whatever came.

After all, he had said something rude, so he was prepared to take it. Of course, to Bagran, even an elf’s spit would be holy water.

If it had been any other dwarf, they would have yelled and berated Ariel.

This was the Dwarf Mountains, after all. There were dwarves everywhere and no elves.

Everyone hated elves, so they would surely side with Bagran.

They would all curse the elf, and then she would storm off with a flushed face, either crying or shouting, “I should have never come to the Dwarf Mountains!”

Bagran didn’t want that to happen. So, he stayed on the ground, looking up at Ariel, bracing himself for whatever she would say.

But Ariel didn't curse him. She didn't even look at him with disgust or spit in his face.

Instead, she extended her hand to him, her expression showing concern.

Bagran looked at Ariel's outstretched hand with bewilderment.

It was a small, white hand.

Though still a bit short due to her young age, it was slender and beautiful.

It stood in stark contrast to Bagran's large, rough, pot-like dwarf hands.

Bagran took Ariel's hand.

She helped him up and even kindly picked up the items that had fallen to the ground.

"Th-thank you...."

Bagran shyly expressed his gratitude, and Ariel smiled softly.

Then, she gently patted Bagran's head, as one might do to comfort a child.

"...?"

Bagran was once again taken aback.

Although he was about the same height as Ariel due to their racial differences, Bagran was a fully grown adult. His beard was thick, after all.

On the other hand, Ariel had a youthful appearance and a small frame. She was probably still growing.

And yet, here she was, treating Bagran like a child, patting him on the head.

'Well, it's not necessarily a bad thing....'

Bagran enjoyed the feeling of Ariel's hand. It was warm and soft. If she did this while he slept, he thought, he would probably sleep very sweetly.

The only issue was the looks he was getting from others.

Passing dwarves shot glances at Ariel, the elf, and at Bagran, who was having his head patted, with looks of pity or disdain.

Bagran invited Ariel and her companions to his home.

When Bagran asked Ariel, "If it's alright, would you like to visit my home?" she nodded readily.

His house wasn't far. After a few minutes of walking, they arrived.

"Just, just give me a moment. I need to tidy up a bit," Bagran said, standing at the front door.

Since he lived alone and rarely invited guests, his house was a mess.

He couldn't let an elf see his house in such a state.

At the very least, he needed to clean up his undergarments and especially the risqué magazines scattered around his bed.

After rushing inside, Bagran emerged about ten minutes later, panting.

"Phew, phew, it's all set now. You can come in."

Ariel entered the house first, followed by Lakia and Lu, and finally Ghost, making the living room feel quite full.

"Smells kind of weird in here."

"It does, doesn't it? They say dwarves don't wash very often."

"Such a lowly race."

Lakia and Lu muttered under their breaths.

Bagran pretended not to hear them, while Ariel was busy looking

around his home.

‘So, this is a dwarf’s house....’

Ariel walked over to where weapons were displayed on the wall.

Dwarves often displayed the weapons they made in their homes.

Humans would come to a dwarf’s house, look at the weapons on display, and decide whether to buy them.

In that sense, a dwarf’s home was like a private weapons shop.

“Want me to give you a tour?”

Bagran walked over to Ariel and took down the round shield she had been eyeing.

“This shield was made by my father. It’s incredibly strong, made of a mithril alloy. It’s so expensive that it hasn’t sold yet, but I can’t sell it for cheap either. Plus, it holds memories of my father, so it’s a valuable shield to me. Oh, am I boring you?”

Bagran hung the shield on his arm and looked at Ariel.

“Want to give it a hit? You’ll be amazed at how tough it is. My father said it could even withstand a dragon’s magic.”

Lakia’s eyes lit up with interest at that.

“Well, let’s see...”

She started to roll up her sleeves, but Lu quickly stopped her.

If Lakia used her magic here, the house would surely be blown to bits.

“Go ahead, you can hit it with your hand or even swing a hammer at it. It won’t leave a scratch.”

“....”

Ariel quietly looked back and forth between the shield and Bagran’s

face.

If she hit the shield with all her strength, it wouldn't just be the shield that broke—Bagran wouldn't be left unscathed either.

But doing nothing would disappoint Bagran, who seemed to be eagerly waiting.

Since Ariel already had a favorable view of dwarves, she didn't want to let down someone who had been so kind to her.

So, she decided to hit the shield.

Very gently.

Just enough so that the shield wouldn't get scratched, as Bagran had said.

Tap.

Ariel lightly punched the shield. So lightly, it could barely even be called a hit.

"Haha, is that all? You can hit it harder. This shield is really strong. My father always said...."

Ariel hit the shield again.

A little harder this time.

But still gently enough that the shield wouldn't be damaged.

Tap.

"Haha, that's cute. You can hit it with more force. Are you worried about hurting your hand? If you are, there's a hammer right over there...."

"I'm done."

Ariel said, and disappointment flashed across Bagran's face.

"Y-You're done? Well, yeah, I guess it's not that fun, huh? Sorry, I

just wanted to show you how durable the shield was....”

Bagran’s shoulders slumped in defeat.

Seeing that, Ariel decided to give it one more try.

“This will be the last time.”

“Alright, hit it properly this time!” Bagran said excitedly.

Ariel clenched her fist and gave the shield a stronger punch than before, just enough to leave a small scratch.

Thunk.

“Oof.”

Bagran staggered backward under the impact.

Though Ariel had struck lightly, the shield felt quite heavy.

“Haha, yeah, that’s more like it! See how sturdy the shield is? Isn’t it amazing?”

Bagran asked, massaging his now-numb arm, and Ariel nodded.

“It’s strong.”

“Exactly! This is the craftsmanship of the dwarves....”

Just then.

Crack!

The shield hanging from Bagran’s arm cracked and crumbled to pieces.

“Huh?”

Bagran stared in disbelief at the shattered remains of the shield on the floor.

The mithril alloy shield his father had left him, worth as much as a

small house, had been destroyed.

All from the punch of a young elf.

“W-What... Why did this happen? This shouldn’t be possible....”

Bagran glanced at Ariel.

She was wearing an incredibly somber expression.

She felt guilty, as though she had ruined something precious.

But to Bagran, it looked like she was disappointed.

“Well, actually, the shield is pretty old. You know, shields can wear out over time... moisture and all that....”

Bagran began making excuses.

At this moment, it didn’t matter to Bagran that the shield his father had left him, which could have bought him a house, was now destroyed.

What mattered more was cheering Ariel up.

Chapter 41 : Dwarf Mountains

(3)

The Dwarves' craftsmanship is the best among all races.

Even the Elves, who dislike the Dwarves, acknowledge this fact.

Dwarven-made items are incredibly sturdy and rarely break.

However, the mithril alloy shield that Bagra proudly showed off was shattered into pieces by a light punch from Ariel.

'She must be disappointed, right?'

Bagra anxiously paced around Ariel.

This was because Ariel was staring at the shattered remains of the shield on the ground with a rather dark expression.

'She's definitely disappointed...!'

Unless Ariel was an Elf with monstrous strength, anyone could see that she appeared to be a small, frail Elf.

If another Dwarf had seen the shield shatter with just a light touch from Ariel, they would have burst into laughter.

"Ha! Is that supposed to be a shield? Even a Goblin could make something better than that!"

Even if they mocked him, he wouldn't have had anything to say in his defense.

'Father... I trusted you....'

Bagra resented his deceased father. If he was going to make

something, he should have done it properly. What a disgrace.

It was fortunate that the shield hadn't sold due to its high price. If it had been sold, it would have certainly caused problems.

Selling such a defective item would have not only ruined the Dwarves' reputation but also gotten Bagran exiled from the Dwarven mountains.

Meanwhile, Ariel, who was still staring at the remains of the shield on the ground, was also feeling uneasy.

For Bagran, it was a precious shield filled with memories of his father, and she had mercilessly broken it.

It was something she should never have done. Even a demon would weep at such an evil act.

"H-Haha, come to think of it, we haven't even introduced ourselves yet, have we?!"

Bagran awkwardly opened his mouth to change the subject.

"My name is Bagran. As you can see, I'm a Dwarf. And you, Miss Elf... your name is...?"

"It's Ariel,"

said Lakia, who was standing nearby, in a very commanding tone.

Bagran shifted his gaze to Lakia.

She had graceful golden hair and wore an elegant dress.

She appeared to be about the same age as Ariel, still quite young, and judging by the atmosphere she exuded, she was undoubtedly a noble.

It wasn't unusual for human nobles to visit the Dwarven mountains to purchase goods, so Bagran wasn't unfamiliar with the type.

However, the large wolf behind her and the fairy perched on her shoulder made for a slightly unusual combination.

Even more peculiar was that there were no knights or guards accompanying them, which was typical for nobles.

“...Are you all friends?”

“We are not friends. I am Ariel’s subordinate. My name is Lakia. And for the record, I am a dragon.”

“Aha, a dragon, huh.”

Bagran nodded. Surprisingly, he seemed to accept it easily, but inside, he didn’t believe it at all. ‘If you’re a dragon, then I’m the Demon King,’ he thought to himself.

Of course, he didn’t show any of this outwardly. Lakia somehow looked prickly, and he felt that continuing the conversation would only lead to trouble.

‘Kids are all like that when they’re young.’

Moreover, Lakia was also quite beautiful.

Bagran, who was always lenient with cute and beautiful beings, decided to go along with Lakia’s mood for now.

Suddenly, he sensed movement beside him.

When he glanced over, he saw Ariel crouched down, picking up the shattered pieces of the shield.

“Ah, no, don’t do that! You’ll hurt yourself!”

Bagran was startled and grabbed Ariel’s wrist.

Ariel looked up at Bagran and asked,

“Can’t this be fixed?”

“Fixed? Why...?”

“It’s a precious shield, filled with memories of your father.”

For a moment, Bagran felt a surge of emotion welling up inside him.

“Sorry. For breaking it.”

When Ariel apologized, Bagran felt his vision blur.

‘S-She wasn’t disappointed... She was actually worried about me...’

Soon, large tears began to fall from Bagran’s eyes.

“That Dwarf... is crying. I thought Dwarves didn’t have tears.”

“He looks even uglier when he cries. It’s like a rock is weeping. Truly a lowly race.”

“Still, our lady is so kind-hearted. Look, she’s comforting that rock.”

“Ariel is as strong as she is generous.”

While Lu and Lakia murmured amongst themselves, Ariel was gently patting Bagran’s back.

Bagran had suddenly burst into tears.

‘It must be because of the shield...’

Ariel, thinking it was her fault, earnestly tried to comfort him.

Even though Bagran was about three times her size, like a baby, he sobbed sorrowfully in her embrace.

“Hic, hic... sniffing... hic!”

Unable to watch any longer, Lu and Lakia approached Bagran.

“Hey, shorty, stop crying. It’s annoying to listen to. If you keep bawling, I’ll turn you to ashes.”

“And don’t cling to our lady like that.”

Bagran quickly wiped his tears and stood up.

“S-Sorry for suddenly crying...”

Dwarves aren’t emotional. They are a steadfast race, like rocks. That’s

what it means to be a Dwarf.

Tears like these weren't becoming of a Dwarf, and Bagran knew it all too well.

So, the crying had to stop here.

"Shall we go outside?"

Although he had invited them to his home, after this unfortunate incident, it seemed better to head outside instead.

Fortunately, there was a festival happening in the Dwarven mountains, so there would be plenty of food and entertainment.

"Sounds good."

Ariel nodded, and so they followed Bagran out into the Dwarven mountains again.

Dwarves were not only skilled in crafting but also in construction.

Although it was a mountain range, the roads and buildings were well-established.

The streets were wide enough that even several carriages could pass through comfortably.

Bagran, Ariel, and their party walked along such a street.

A Dwarf, an Elf, a Human, a Fairy, and a Wolf.

It was only natural that such a combination would draw attention.

Especially when the Dwarves saw Ariel's pointed ears, they revealed their hostility and cursed Bagran for walking alongside her.

"What's that idiot grinning at, hanging around with an Elf?"

"That guy doesn't even deserve to be called a Dwarf!"

On top of that, Ariel and Bagran were holding hands, which irritated Lu and Lakia, who were following behind them.

“How dare that Dwarf hold our lady’s hand...”

“I’ve barely even held her hand a few times...!”

Despite the hostility directed at them, Bagran just continued to smile.

“Ariel, look at that. That’s an ancient statue from long ago, said to depict a hero who defeated the Demon King. But doesn’t he look weak? Honestly, just judging by his face, it looks like I could take him down with one punch. Anyway, my father said that my grandfather’s grandfather participated in the making of that statue. Impressive, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, and over there, that’s the food Dwarves enjoy. It doesn’t taste great, though. Dwarves prefer hard food over soft, so most of it is like that. It’s probably not suitable for you, Ariel. And over there...”

As Bagran chattered on excitedly and Ariel quietly nodded in agreement, they eventually came to a stop at a certain part of the street.

Dwarves were gathered everywhere, and quite a few humans were around as well.

“Oh, it looks like it’s about to start.”

Bagran said this just as a loud voice shouted from somewhere.

[Ladies and gentlemen!]

[Once again, we’ve gathered for the event you’ve all been waiting for—the barehanded smashing competition!]

“Yeah!!”

Cheers erupted from the crowd.

[Who will be the winner this year? And, of course, we have a prize for the victor!]

“...That’s the annual barehanded smashing competition. Winning doesn’t really grant any honor, but the prize is usually pretty good.”

Bagran explained, and Ariel turned her gaze toward the area where the Dwarves had gathered.

Large boulders lined up, which seemed to be the targets for smashing, and a Dwarf who appeared to be the host was gathering participants.

Bagran continued speaking.

“The barehanded smashing competition is one of the more entertaining events. Not only Dwarves but also humans participate. Of course, since you can’t use mana, a Dwarf has always won, thanks to our superior strength.”

Ariel nodded slightly. That made sense.

Dwarves had thicker hands and arms than humans, so they were naturally better suited for smashing boulders with their bare hands.

[Now, let me introduce this year’s prize!]

The host Dwarf shouted loudly.

[The prize for this year’s winner is... this! A mithril alloy shield! Let’s have a round of applause!]

“Yeah!!”

The crowd erupted into enthusiastic applause.

Ariel looked at the prize the host was holding.

A mithril alloy shield.

It looked much larger and sturdier than the one she had broken earlier at Bagran’s house.

“Haha, seeing that makes me feel embarrassed again. Ariel, you might be misunderstanding, but the one at my house earlier was

definitely a defective product. But this one is a proper shield. Since it's made of mithril, it's bound to be tough and durable... Huh? Ariel...?"

Bagran looked around.

Ariel, who had been beside him

just a moment ago, was nowhere to be seen.

"A-Ariel?"

At some point, Ariel had lined up with the participants waiting for the barehanded smashing competition.

Chapter 42 : Dwarf Mountains

(4)

The object of destruction in the bare-handed breaking competition starts with a rock.

Since the dwarf race is naturally gifted with great physical strength, with just a little training, they can break rocks. Therefore, not many participants are eliminated at the rock stage.

However, as the stages progress, the materials to be broken become increasingly harder.

At that point, many participants drop out, and injuries occur frequently.

It's common for participants to cut their skin or fracture their bones if they fail to break through the metal object in one strike.

Although the competition is prepared with healing powders like fairy dust for such situations, the organizers still wanted to prevent injuries beforehand.

After all, the event was created for everyone to have fun, even though it's a competition.

That's why Kuran, the dwarf hosting the event, wore a rather troubled expression.

Since this was a bare-handed breaking competition, most of the participants were either dwarves with bulging arms or large, burly humans.

However, among the participants stood someone completely out of place.

A young elf girl with shining silver hair stood quietly with a blank expression.

Compared to the other participants, her arms were as thin as a chick's legs.

It was clear that if she struck the rock with those arms, her bones would break, and her skin would tear.

Elves were known to have flexible bones and delicate skin, and on top of that, this elf girl was still very young.

She must have entered out of curiosity, but if the competition proceeded as is, she would surely get injured.

Kuran had to stop her.

Aside from the longstanding animosity between dwarves and elves, if there were too many injuries in the competition, Kuran would be the one blamed.

"Hey, little one?" Kuran called out.

The elf girl raised her eyes to look at him.

Her red eyes were as deep as blood, and her gaze was unnervingly calm for a child.

"Hmm... This competition is really, really dangerous. Hitting a rock with your bare hands will hurt a lot. How about you go over there and just watch? I'll give you something tasty in return."

Kuran rummaged through his pockets and handed her a few walnuts, a favorite snack of dwarves.

The elf girl quietly stared at the walnuts in Kuran's hand. Then, she turned her gaze away.

'Looks like she hates it.'

Kuran felt awkward.

Of course, walnuts were a dwarf's favorite snack, but who knew how other races felt about them? Elves probably liked sweet and soft things.

"Hmm... I'm just worried you might get hurt. Look at this, the rock is really hard. Do you think you can break this with your bare hands? It'll hurt a lot, don't you think?"

Despite Kuran's words, the elf girl, with no change in expression, said quietly, "I'll give it a try."

"..."

Soon, it was time for the competition to begin.

Kuran hesitated, glancing at the elf girl.

Part of him didn't want to let her participate, but according to the rules, participation was free for anyone.

Kuran had no right to stop her.

"Heh heh, just let it be, host. Let the kid have a taste of the real world," said the dwarf standing next to the elf girl, his thick arms folded.

"Once her skin is torn and her bones are broken, she'll realize, 'Oh, dwarves are a mighty race that can't be underestimated! Elves are no match for dwarves! I'll be careful not to offend dwarves from now on!' Hah hah."

"Puh! Right, elves need to be taught a lesson. So just go ahead and proceed," another dwarf chimed in.

As the other dwarves egged him on, Kuran quietly bit his lip.

He understood their disdain for elves, and truthfully, Kuran wasn't particularly fond of elves either, but still, she was just a child.

Did they really need to see a child get hurt to be satisfied?

"Hey, little one, be careful. Really. Just hit it lightly. It's okay if you

don't break the rock. Just participating is brave enough. Got it?"

The elf girl quietly nodded at Kuran's words.

Her expression was still calm, making it hard to know what she was thinking inside.

Kuran turned to the crowd and shouted.

[Alright, let's start the bare-handed breaking competition! Give them a round of applause!]

"Wooo!!"

Clap clap clap!

[The first object is a rock! Surely no dwarf will be eliminated at this stage, right? After all, if you're a dwarf, you should be able to break a rock with your bare hands! That's what being a dwarf is all about!]

"Break it! Smash it to dust!"

The excited dwarves watching began stomping their feet and shouting.

The atmosphere of the event was heating up.

Meanwhile, whispers about the elf girl started circulating among the spectators.

"What's that elf girl doing here? Why is she participating?"

"She's got guts. But this isn't a place for her. Does she think breaking things with bare hands is easy?"

"She'll probably cry after hitting the rock. Boo-hoo~."

"That'll be fun to see. Hah hah."

Kuran once again looked at the elf girl with worried eyes.

No matter what people said around her, she stood tall, facing straight ahead.

It wasn't as if she couldn't hear the murmurs, but she just chose not to react.

'Please don't get hurt.'

Praying silently, Kuran blew his whistle.

Tweet!

[Let the breaking begin!]

Silence spread across the arena.

Everyone stood with their mouths agape, staring at one place.

The elf girl's spot.

Kuran blinked, also staring at the elf girl.

She stood there just as before, her expression unchanged, gazing into the air. She looked like a statue.

'W-What just happened?'

Kuran tilted his head, trying to recall what had just unfolded.

It happened the moment Kuran shouted, "Begin!"

At the same time, the elf girl seemed to move slightly, and the rock in front of her shattered with a cracking sound.

Not just broken—it crumbled into powder.

Compared to the other participants' objects, which were split into two or three large pieces, her result was truly astonishing.

"What the... Is that magic?"

"Yeah, it's magic! It has to be!"

"There's no way that's possible without magic! It's a rock!"

Both the participants and the dwarves in the audience began to

suspect the elf girl of using magic.

To be honest, even Kuran couldn't help but wonder if she had used magic, because it seemed impossible for her thin arms to break a rock to such an extent.

However, this was not a competition where magic could be used so easily.

The stage where the participants stood had devices that restrained mana, so if the elf girl had used magic, an alarm would have gone off immediately.

“Cheating! She cheated! Get that elf girl out of here!”

Chapter 43 : Dwarf Mountains

(5)

Watching Ariel participate in the barehanded smashing competition, Bagran thought he should stop her.

The barehanded smashing competition, as the name suggests, involves smashing objects with bare hands.

The objects are all solid materials like rocks or metal.

Even for Dwarves, who are naturally strong, breaking rocks or metal isn't easy, and the competition is so dangerous that many participants are injured each year.

It's definitely not a competition that a fragile Elf girl like Ariel should be entering.

"I need to stop Ariel..."

Bagran muttered as he moved to intervene, but Lakia grabbed his collar from behind.

"Are you planning to interfere with what Lady Ariel is doing?"

"It's not interference. Ariel might get hurt if this goes on."

"Hurt? Who do you think could possibly hurt Lady Ariel?"

"Well, the rock..."

"The rock?"

When Lakia tilted her head, Bagran pointed to the large rock in front of Ariel.

“If Ariel strikes that rock, her skin might get scraped. She could even bruise.”

In reality, the injuries from this competition are far more severe than that.

It's not just a matter of skin getting scraped—people's skin gets torn, and rather than bruises, bones get fractured.

But that's only if the person has considerable strength.

For Ariel, her strongest hit would probably be equivalent to that of a child.

A child's strength wouldn't cause her skin to tear or her bones to break when hitting a rock.

“Ariel could get hurt!”

“Pfft.”

Lakia burst into laughter at Bagran's serious tone.

Lu, sitting on Lakia's shoulder, also chuckled.

Bagran looked baffled.

“...What's wrong with you two? Don't you care about Ariel? You said you're her friends... No, her subordinates.”

“We are her subordinates. But worrying about Lady Ariel in a contest against a rock is an insult to her.”

“Yeah, it's an offense to our lady.”

Lakia and Lu said this with sly smiles, making it seem like they were treating Bagran like a fool.

“Don't interfere, just watch Lady Ariel quietly, dwarf.”

‘Dwarf...’

Bagran glanced at Lakia's height. They were about the same height.

In fact, Lakia was a little shorter.

‘Who’s calling who a dwarf...?’

Bagran had a retort on the tip of his tongue but chose not to say it.

If he said something like, “Aren’t you the dwarf here?” it would just make Lakia angrier.

But that wasn’t the important issue right now.

If this continues, Ariel might really get hurt.

‘Should I still stop her...?’

Just as Bagran was thinking that, the sound of a whistle echoed through the air.

The signal to start the competition.

Bagran hurriedly turned to look at Ariel.

And he was shocked.

The large rock in front of Ariel had been completely pulverized into dust.

Bagran stood there, mouth agape, unable to say a word.

‘A-Ariel broke that rock...?’

It was an unbelievable sight.

It seemed the other Dwarves were just as shocked, as they started shouting while pointing at Ariel.

“What, what is that... Is it magic?”

“Yeah, magic! She must have used magic!”

“There’s no way! It’s a rock, after all!”

Magic.

For a moment, Bagran almost believed it.

That Ariel had used magic.

Otherwise, how could she have possibly shattered the rock?

Elves are known for their high affinity with mana, so maybe Ariel had learned some magic that could break rocks.

But.

‘No... it can’t be magic...’

The barehanded smashing competition is strictly about using one’s bare hands to smash the objects.

If it were possible to break things with magic, then humans would have won every year.

Humans are more adept at using mana than Dwarves, and there are more human mages.

But in this competition, there are mana-restraining devices installed, making it impossible to use magic.

In the past, someone had tried to use mana, and when the alarm went off, they were disqualified and humiliated.

[Ladies and gentlemen, please calm down! In the barehanded smashing competition, it’s impossible to use magic! If magic had been used, an alarm would have gone off loudly!]

The host Dwarf tried to calm the crowd, but the atmosphere had already heated up.

“But still, this doesn’t make sense!”

“Yeah! It’s impossible! Turning a rock into dust?”

“Just look at that kid’s skinny arms!”

At that, Lakia, standing next to Bagran, flared up.

“How dare they speak rudely to Lady Ariel... I'll drop a meteor on their heads...”

“Calm down, Lakia. If you do that, the entire Dwarven mountains will be blown away.”

“Let them be blown away. These lowly creatures need to learn what happens when they insult Lady Ariel. I'll turn their short, stocky bodies to ash and destroy their souls...”

Listening to Lakia and Lu's conversation, Bagran narrowed his eyes.

‘What in the world are they talking about?’

Meteors, ashes, souls—Lakia and Lu seemed to be a bit over the top with their dramatics.

[Everyone, you must accept the results. I don't quite understand it myself, but the Elf girl did not cheat. She simply smashed the rock with her bare hands. That's all. Perhaps we can keep a close eye on her during the next round?]

“Then hurry up and start the next round! We'll keep a close eye on her this time!”

“There's no way she'll get away with it next time, Elf!”

“If she cheats again, it's war!”

Despite the commotion, the competition seemed to continue.

The host introduced the next object for smashing, and everyone was fixated on Ariel, watching to see if she would use magic.

Another whistle blew, signaling the start of the next round.

[The smashing begins!]

Bagran swallowed nervously.

How had Ariel managed to smash the rock? Was there some special Elven technique for smashing things?

If so, could she succeed again? Could she break steel?

At last, Ariel moved.

She clenched her fist and struck the steel.

It was a very light motion.

She barely tapped the steel, almost as if she were playing.

Like a child pretending to strike something for fun.

But the result was shocking.

With a cracking sound, the steel crumbled into dust.

The crowd fell silent.

Neither the host Dwarf nor Bagran, nor anyone else, could speak.

What on earth was happening? She clearly hadn't used magic, yet how did that even happen?

If Ariel had at least shouted "Hyaah!" or jumped dramatically into the air, it might have been a little more understandable.

But Ariel had merely tapped the steel in a playful, almost cute manner—something one might even call girlish.

And yet the result was...

"Ariel, you're amazing!"

"As expected of our lady!!"

The only ones cheering were Lakia and Lu.

Everyone else just stared in a daze at Ariel and the pile of steel dust in front of her.

[Uh, um... wow...]

The competition host, Kuran, finally regained his composure.

[Did you all see that? The Elf girl broke the steel with pure strength. She did not use magic. It wasn't a foul.]

Despite his words, Kuran's eyes were darting nervously. He, too, found it hard to believe what he had just seen.

[Ah, right, we also have some injured participants. Please receive medical attention.]

As usual, many participants had been injured this year.

Several had torn their hands or broken bones while trying to smash the steel.

Dwarves standing by with medical supplies quickly moved the injured out of the competition area.

Quite a few participants had also failed to completely smash the steel, and as they were led away, only three contestants remained in the arena.

A large human, a particularly burly Dwarf, and Ariel.

[Oh, last year, only two contestants made it this far, but this year, we have three. Impressive. Let's continue with the competition. The next object for smashing is... titanium!]

The next objects were placed in front of the contestants.

Titanium.

Even tougher than steel, breaking titanium with bare hands would require superhuman strength.

[What do you think, folks? Do you think the Elf girl can smash titanium as well?]

"Maybe..."

"We just saw her turn steel into dust. She's definitely going to win."

"Impressive. With strength like that, I guess even an Elf can earn my

respect.”

Dwarves are simple folk.

Though they had initially accused Ariel of cheating or using magic, after witnessing her strength firsthand, they had no further complaints.

They simply acknowledged her.

“Go for it, Elf girl!”

“Yeah, turn that titanium into dust too!”

At some point, the Dwarves had started cheering for Ariel.

[All right, let’s begin the next round.]

Another whistle blew, and Ariel lightly struck the titanium with the edge of her hand.

And just like before, the result was the same.

The titanium crumbled into dust with a light crackling sound.

Meanwhile, the other two contestants, the large human and the burly Dwarf, both failed to break the titanium.

They clutched their reddened hands, groaning in pain.

[Well, folks, the winner of this year’s competition is... the Elf girl!!]

Kuran’s words were followed by a thunderous cheer from the crowd.

“Wow!!”

Chapter 44 : Dwarf Mountains

(6)

The titanium struck by the other contestants was only slightly dented or bent, but the titanium that Ariel hit had turned completely into dust.

Thus, Ariel was declared the winner.

No one had any objections.

The audience, as well as the defeated contestants, acknowledged the results graciously and applauded Ariel.

Watching this, Bagran thought to himself,

‘Sorry for doubting you, Father...’

The fact that the mithril alloy shield shattered under Ariel’s punch wasn’t because his father had made it poorly.

It was simply because Ariel was strong enough to turn titanium into dust with a light strike of her hand.

With her strength, any shield would likely have met the same fate.

Realizing this, Bagran felt at ease. His father’s craftsmanship wasn’t at fault after all.

“Bagran.”

At the sound of a voice, Bagran turned his head. Ariel had approached him without him noticing.

She was holding the mithril alloy shield she had won as the prize for the competition.

“Ariel, congratulations on winning. You’re incredibly strong! I was so surprised... Huh?”

Bagran stopped mid-sentence, tilting his head in confusion.

Ariel suddenly handed the mithril alloy shield to him.

“W-Why are you giving me this?”

“Take it.”

“What...?”

Bagran looked bewildered as he accepted the shield.

“This is... the prize you won for the competition.”

“I don’t need it.”

Bagran gazed at the mithril alloy shield in silence.

It was a valuable item, worthy of a winner, and if sold, it would certainly fetch a hefty price.

But to say she didn’t need it... that couldn’t be true.

No matter how ungreedy Elves were said to be, there was no reason for Ariel to simply give him such an item.

‘Could it be... she’s giving me this because she feels bad about breaking my shield... Did she enter the competition just to give me this shield?’

Bagran bit his lip and looked at Ariel, his eyes growing red.

To think she had entered the competition just to give him the shield—how could such a kind-hearted Elf exist in this world?

“T-Thank you, Ariel....”

Of course, the shield Ariel had given him could never replace the one filled with memories of his father.

But from now on, this shield would become incredibly precious to Bagran.

“Thank you so much...”

Bagran hugged the shield tightly, tears streaming down his face.

And once again, Ariel gently patted Bagran’s back to console him.

Ariel, having won the barehanded smashing competition, became a famous figure in the Dwarven mountains.

Everywhere she went, Dwarves gathered around her, striking up conversations, and some even asked for handshakes and autographs.

“I used to think Elves were just delicate and fragile, but not Ariel! Ariel’s a tough Elf!”

Normally, Elves were known to nag Dwarves about destroying nature, but Ariel was nothing like that.

In fact, she even helped the Dwarves in their mining efforts, drilling large holes in the mines—using only her bare hands, no less.

“Wow!”

“Hail Ariel!”

The Dwarves praised Ariel as a hero, and some Dwarves even seriously considered proposing to her.

Not that Ariel would ever accept, of course.

In any case, Ariel spent a few peaceful and happy days in the Dwarven mountains.

Just as Ariel had thought, the Dwarves were a race with thick beards, short stature, and sturdy hands and feet.

While these features might not meet typical standards of beauty, Ariel found them quite endearing.

Even in real life, rather than on a game screen, the Dwarves felt

somewhat like characters to her.

During their stay in the Dwarven mountains, Ariel's group stayed at Bagran's house.

Although Lakia and Lu had initially been cold towards Bagran, they gradually became quite friendly with him.

Lu became close to Bagran naturally as they drank together, and Lakia, upon seeing how kindly Ariel treated Bagran, tried to behave in a similar manner.

About a week after Ariel's party had been staying in the Dwarven mountains, Bagran brought up an interesting topic during a meal.

"Hey, have you heard? The humans are selecting a new hero soon."

"A new hero?"

Lu asked with a puzzled expression.

"Why are they selecting a new hero? The war with the demons is already over."

"It's not over yet. Things are calm for now, but the demons could start another war at any time. That's why they need a hero. Just having a hero will prevent the demons from making any rash moves."

"Hmm, I see."

It was a peaceful time.

Although there were still minor conflicts with demons and tensions between races, there were no major wars.

But as history had proven, peace never lasts forever.

One day, the demons would wage war again in an attempt to take over the continent.

The only reason they weren't acting now was because they had lost much of their power in the previous war.

Once they regained their strength, they would undoubtedly attack the other races to fulfill their ambitions.

To prevent or at least delay that, a hero was necessary.

“It’s been a long time since the last hero died.”

The last hero, Leonhardt.

He had played a significant role in the war against the demons.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the current peace was thanks to Leonhardt’s efforts.

Leonhardt, the brave warrior chosen by the gods, had defeated countless demons and died a heroic death.

People built statues of him and established memorial days to honor him, but that alone wouldn’t bring peace.

It was time for a new hero to be chosen.

“And the way they select the hero is interesting,” Bagran said, chewing on his food.

“There’s a sword left behind by the previous hero. It’s said to be a divine sword, gifted by the gods. I think it’s called Excalibur or something. Anyway, whoever can pull that sword out will be recognized as the new hero. Of course, it only applies to humans.”

Since the beginning of the continent’s history, heroes had always been selected from among the humans.

No matter how strong other races were—even if they were as powerful as dragons—they were never chosen as heroes.

Heroes were always human.

“It’s probably because of their short lifespans. Think about it: if a hero were chosen from a long-lived race like Elves or Dwarves, they’d live for a very long time with the power of the gods. If they were to misuse that power, the continent would fall into chaos.”

“Is that so?”

Lu scratched the back of his neck, not entirely convinced by Bagran’s explanation.

It sounded plausible enough, but as a fairy, it didn’t quite resonate with him.

From the perspective of a fairy, it didn’t really matter who became the hero or which race they came from. Fairies had never been involved in wars.

The country where fairies lived was impossible for other races to enter.

In fact, it was impossible for any other race to even invade their lands.

So as long as fairies didn’t venture outside, what happened on the continent didn’t concern them.

That’s why fairies were so carefree.

If a fairy were chosen as the hero, they’d likely do nothing to save the continent.

They’d probably just drink and wander around looking at flowers.

Of course, this was all irrelevant.

There was no chance a fairy would be chosen as the hero, nor could they pull Excalibur from its resting place.

“Anyway, the ceremony to pull Excalibur and select the hero is happening soon. It’s being held in Gold Castle, the nearest human city.”

“Really?”

The one most intrigued by Bagran’s story was Lakia.

“I want to try it! I want to pull Excalibur!”

Lakia remembered hearing stories about the hero's sword, Excalibur, from her mother when she was young.

Her mother had told her that Excalibur was a sword reserved for humans.

No matter how strong a dragon was, they couldn't pull it.

But despite that, Lakia wanted to give it a try.

Could it really be true that she couldn't pull it? After all, she was a dragon—surely she could pull out a single sword, right?

There was no way she couldn't.

There are people who, when told they can't do something, become even more determined to try, and Lakia was one of those people.

Lakia looked at Ariel.

“Lady Ariel, can we go too? I really want to try pulling Excalibur. I feel like I could do it!”

Then she began to ponder seriously to herself.

“But wait, if I really pull it, does that make me the hero? And if I become the hero, what do I have to do? Defeat demons...?”

Listening to Lakia mutter to herself, Ariel slowly stood up.

Though Lakia had the strongest reaction to the story about Excalibur, Ariel's heart had also started to race.

Like Lakia, she too wanted to see Excalibur in person and try pulling it herself.

There was no reason to hesitate.

She had already been thinking that it was time to move on to another place.

No matter how much she liked the Dwarves, she couldn't stay here forever.

Ariel's goal was adventure, and staying in one place for too long wasn't an adventure.

"Let's go."

Ariel softly spoke to her companions.

"To the place where the hero's sword is."

Chapter 45 : Gold Castle (1)

The sword of the hero, Excalibur, is a weapon bestowed by the gods.

If one could only pull out that sword—if one were chosen by the gods—they could unleash a power befitting the title of a hero.

With that power, the previous hero, Leonhardt, always led the charge in battles against the demonic tribes, achieving numerous victories before dying a glorious death.

So what happened to Excalibur afterward?

According to several eyewitness accounts, the moment Leonhardt took his last breath, Excalibur also scattered, shining in a golden light.

Excalibur is literally the sword of the hero.

Since the chosen hero had died, people believed that Excalibur had returned to the hands of the gods.

However, not long after, Excalibur was discovered in a city called Goldcastle, located in the western part of the Empire.

It appeared right in front of Leonhardt's statue in the center of the city.

It was an event that occurred without any prior warning.

The night before, there was definitely nothing there, but the next morning, suddenly, Excalibur was stuck at the base of Leonhardt's statue.

The first person to discover it was a passing merchant, who didn't even know it was Excalibur.

He simply saw what appeared to be a luxurious sword stuck in the ground and tried to pull it out, but no matter how hard he tried, it wouldn't budge.

Even attempting to dig up the ground around the sword was futile, as the area was protected by some unknown force.

The sword was found by the city guards, and after being reported up the chain, it eventually reached the Emperor, and only then was it revealed that the sword was indeed Excalibur, the hero's sword.

Why had Excalibur, which had disappeared with Leonhardt, suddenly reappeared?

The reason was simple.

It was the will of the gods.

The gods had chosen a new hero.

The Emperor decided to heed that will. He set up facilities around Excalibur and organized a ceremony to select the new hero.

It was a fair ceremony where anyone, regardless of age, gender, or even race, could freely try to pull the sword.

Though heroes were usually chosen from humans, it wasn't impossible for one to come from another race.

A massive crowd flocked to Goldcastle in an attempt to pull Excalibur and become the new hero.

Nobles, commoners, and even people from other races all wanted to draw Excalibur and claim the title of hero.

Of course, none of them had any noble thoughts of defeating the demonic tribes or saving the continent.

It was a time of peace. The demonic tribes were still quiet. There wasn't even the faintest sign of war.

They simply wanted to become heroes because it would make them

revered by all, and they would be treated with the utmost respect within the Empire.

The moment one pulled Excalibur, in other words, the moment they became a hero, they could change their fate dramatically.

Ariel and her companions left the Dwarf Mountains early in the morning.

Though it had been a short time, they had grown close during their stay, so Bagran was visibly saddened.

No, he wasn't just sad—he burst into tears.

Even so, Bagran did not follow Ariel's group.

Dwarves must live in the Dwarf Mountains.

Mining ores and crafting weapons in the Dwarf Mountains was the proper life for a dwarf.

Following Ariel and wandering around human cities wouldn't suit a dwarf. He certainly wouldn't be able to adjust.

And so, they bid Bagran farewell.

“Click, click.”

Seeing Bagran cry uncontrollably, Lu clicked his tongue.

“A man shouldn't cry. This isn't a forever goodbye. We'll meet again next time. My sister also said she'd come back to visit.”

Lu, who said this, had slightly reddened eyes. He was pretending to be cool, but he also felt the sadness of parting with Bagran.

And what about Lakia?

“Ba-Bagran... Sniff, live well and don't get hurt...! If anyone bothers you, just tell me. I'll come running to scold them. I'll definitely come back with Lady Ariel. Until then, take care...!”

Lakia wasn't much different.

She, too, was sobbing, feeling the sadness of parting with Bagran. Compared to the cold attitude she had initially shown, her reaction was quite a contrast.

The only ones who seemed unaffected were Ariel and Ghost.

Ariel, with a calm expression, climbed atop Ghost and simply waved a small hand to Bagran.

Of course, that was only on the surface—Ariel, too, felt the sadness of parting with Bagran deep inside.

But she couldn't afford to waste too much emotion.

Where there is a meeting, there is also parting.

In the course of their adventures, they would repeatedly meet and part with many people, and expending emotions every time would make the journey exhausting.

So, partings were kept simple.

“Goodbye, Bagran.”

With just those words, Ariel turned around.

Lakia and Lu slowly followed her, while Bagran stood and watched.

Just as Ariel's group was about to disappear from sight, Bagran shouted loudly.

“Goodbye, Ariel! Thank you! Please come visit again! I'll be waiting! Goodbye, Lakia, Lu, and Ghost!!”

In the distance, Ariel raised her hand slowly as if to say she heard him.

Only then did Bagran wipe his tears and smile brightly.

Surely, they would meet again someday. For now, he could only believe that.

Chapter 46 : Gold Castle (2)

The soldier of the security forces quickly realized the girl's identity after noticing her pointed ears.

An elf.

Elves usually lived in forests, but occasionally they were captured and enslaved by humans.

In Gold Castle, it wasn't uncommon to see such elf slaves, so the soldier wasn't particularly surprised to discover that the girl was an elf.

However, there was something different about this girl compared to the elf slaves he had seen in Gold Castle.

Elf slaves typically wore shackles around their necks and had a gloomy, hopeless look on their faces, but this girl was different.

She had no shackles on her neck, and her face wasn't gloomy at all.

Her face was expressionless.

With just a blank expression, the girl was holding onto the soldier's baton.

"What's this?"

The soldier tried to retrieve his baton, but it wouldn't budge from the girl's grip.

"Are you daring to interfere with the duties of the security forces?"

In the city, interfering with the security forces was a serious crime.

Depending on the situation, it could even lead to summary execution.

If the opponent was a high-ranking noble, it would be a different story, but for a mere child, not even human but of another race, there would be no problem drawing a sword and cutting off her head.

“You insolent brat.”

The soldier let go of the baton and reached for his sword at his waist.

He didn’t intend to kill the elf girl, but he thought that drawing his sword would scare her off.

However, just as the soldier was about to grip the handle of his sword, he heard a chilling voice from behind.

“The insolent one here is you, lowly human.”

The soldier flinched and turned around.

Before he knew it, a blonde girl in a dress and a giant silver wolf were standing behind him.

On top of the silver wolf’s head sat a small winged creature, likely a fairy.

“Who are you...?”

The soldier asked, looking at the blonde girl.

The blonde girl’s clothes were luxurious, and her gaze was so imposing that she appeared to be a high-ranking noblewoman.

As a result, the soldier slightly adjusted his attitude.

“I’m currently carrying out official duties. I don’t know which noble family you belong to, but it would be troublesome if you obstructed this.”

Of course, he only softened his attitude a little—he had no intention of backing down.

In Gold Castle, the Baraton family ruled as kings.

Since he was following the orders of the Baraton family, there was no

reason to back down for another noble, especially not a young girl like this.

The blonde girl smirked.

“I don’t care about the work of lowly humans. What’s important is that you’re about to draw your sword against Lady Ariel without knowing your place. Go ahead and try. The moment you do, I’ll turn your body to ashes.”

The soldier quickly scanned the blonde girl from head to toe.

Her dress was luxurious but wrinkled in places.

Even the buttons were done up wrong, and her sleeves were slightly rolled up—she didn’t look neat upon closer inspection.

Her hair was tied back, but it seemed hastily done, not carefully brushed.

“No escort knights either.”

Judging by these factors, this blonde girl might not even be a noble.

Even if she was, she likely belonged to a fallen lower house.

And her companions were equally ridiculous—a wolf, a fairy, and an elf. With this lineup, hitting them with his baton and driving them away wouldn’t be a problem.

But something bothered him.

“How is that wolf so big...? How did it get into the city...?”

The soldier had trained his body since childhood and practiced swordsmanship before joining the security forces, but he wasn’t confident he could take on that giant silver wolf.

It would take at least three soldiers to subdue that beast.

“I’ll have to call for backup.”

The soldier put the whistle hanging from his neck to his lips.

Once he blew the whistle, the security forces would arrive in no time.

Then, he could throw these ridiculous kids in jail for obstructing official duties.

But.

The soldier couldn't blow the whistle.

A magic circle had suddenly appeared, glowing beneath his feet.

A purple, glowing magic circle.

Even at a glance, it was a high-level spell.

The soldier looked up again at the blonde girl.

She was still smiling calmly, preparing to snap her fingers.

The moment she snapped them, the spell would activate, and whatever it was, the soldier wouldn't survive it.

"Why aren't you doing anything? Do whatever you want."

The blonde girl taunted, but the soldier couldn't move. His hands, still gripping the whistle, were slick with sweat.

"Hurry up~"

In the end, the soldier dropped the whistle.

He could handle the elf girl and even subdue the silver wolf with backup, but dealing with a mage was different.

One wrong move, and they could all be wiped out by the mage. And mages were often of higher status than nobles.

Perhaps she was the favored apprentice of the Tower Master, or a genius with the potential to become a great mage...

"A-Are you a mage? I didn't realize. Are you from the Magic Tower?"

The soldier asked as he slowly stepped back, raising his hands in a

show of submission.

There was no other choice—his life was precious. There was no need to risk his life just to drive away a couple of stray kids.

“I’m not a mage.”

The blonde girl replied bluntly, but the soldier didn’t hear her. For now, getting out of there was all that mattered.

“My apologies...!”

The soldier awkwardly smiled and quickly walked away, relieved that no one stopped him.

Once the soldier disappeared, Ariel threw the baton she had been holding far away.

Then, she looked at the two vagrant children huddled on the ground.

A boy and a girl, both with red hair.

They both seemed to be around ten years old, not much different in age from Ariel and Lakia.

Their disheveled appearance made it clear they were street urchins.

Their hair, faces, and clothes were filthy, and their cheeks were sunken, likely from not eating for days.

Ariel took some food out of her inventory.

She pulled out two precious cream buns, some jerky she had saved for emergencies, and warm stew she had acquired somewhere, and gave them to the two children.

The short-haired boy, who seemed to be the older brother, glared at Ariel warily at first, but as soon as the food appeared, he devoured it greedily.

However, he made sure to feed his long-haired younger sister first before eating himself.

Munch, munch.

It didn't take long for the two children to finish the food.

The food Ariel had given them disappeared quickly, and only then did the two children look at Ariel with satisfied expressions.

"Thanks, elf."

The boy said, but someone smacked him on the back of the head—Lakia.

"Call her Lady Ariel, human."

"..."

The boy looked a bit upset, but he didn't dare challenge Lakia.

He had witnessed the magic that had appeared beneath the soldier's feet, and the soldier had called her a mage.

Defying a mage could get him killed.

"I, I mean, thank you, Lady Ariel."

"Yes, say it properly—thank you, Lady Ariel."

"Th-thank you, Lady Ariel."

Following Lakia's correction, the boy obediently repeated the words.

Beside him, his younger sister also bowed her head and quietly thanked Ariel.

"Th-thank you... Lady Ariel..."

Her voice was barely audible, likely because she was shy, but Lakia didn't seem to pick on her for that.

"Well, goodbye."

Ariel said, turning her back on them.

Though she had rescued them and given them food, it was only because they had happened to catch her eye.

She didn't know anything about their situation, and while they surely had their own troubles, she wasn't going to take responsibility for their lives.

She was willing to help but didn't intend to meddle further—that was her mindset.

As Ariel started walking, Lakia, Ghost, and Lu followed closely behind.

Watching them leave, the boy suddenly stood up.

“Hey, wait!”

“Hm?”

Ariel stopped and looked back at the boy.

The boy smiled awkwardly and said,

“I'm Zion. And this is my little sister, Clara. Thanks for saving us and giving us food. I'll repay you someday. I'm going to be a hero soon! I plan to pull out Excalibur!”

At Zion's words, Lu, sitting on Ghost's head, chuckled.

“A kid who can't even feed himself says he'll be a hero. I'd become one faster than you.”

Lakia glared at Zion.

“I'm the hero. Don't get cocky, human.”

Ariel didn't say anything.

After a brief moment of silence, Lu suddenly turned serious and muttered.

“...Wait, hold on. Isn't it always kids like him who become heroes? A street urchin who one day pulls out the hero's sword—doesn't that

sound more believable somehow?”

“I said I’m the hero.”

Lakia repeated, and Ariel simply continued walking again.

Chapter 47 : Gold Castle (3)

It was by no means easy for Ariel and her companions to enter Gold Castle.

Previously, in Sierra, they had easily passed through the gate with the help of a merchant named Lloyd, but this time, no such fortunate circumstance occurred.

The soldier guarding the gate persistently interrogated Ariel's group, asking about their purpose, where they were from, and how they had met.

Currently, Gold Castle was flooded with people due to the hero selection ceremony.

As a result, the gate was being guarded even more thoroughly, just in case any demons entered to cause trouble.

Of course, if Ariel had been alone, things wouldn't have been so complicated.

Since the opportunity to pull the Hero's Sword was open to any race except demons, it wouldn't have mattered if Ariel had been a lizardman instead of an elf—she would have passed through the gate without any questions.

Lakia, who was a dragon, looked like a human, so there was no problem, and Rue, being a fairy, was so small that there was no need to pay much attention to her.

The real issue was Ghost.

From the soldier's perspective, there was no way he could allow a large wolf to enter the city without concern.

If something happened, the soldier would be held responsible.

In the end, Ariel had to pay a significant amount as a toll to let Ghost pass and was assigned accommodations before being allowed to enter Gold Castle.

Not only was the toll high, but the place Ariel was assigned to was a large lodging capable of housing a wolf, so the lodging fee wasn't cheap either.

It was several times more expensive compared to a regular place.

However, Ariel wasn't particularly concerned about money.

There were still plenty of gold coins left in her inventory from selling monster corpses in Sierra.

Even if she spent freely for years, she wouldn't run out.

Anyway, after entering Gold Castle, Ariel and her group decided to head straight to the inn.

Although she wanted to visit the central plaza where the Hero's Sword, embedded in the ground before the statue of the previous hero Leonhardt, was located, the streets were crowded with people.

Everyone was gathering to try and pull the Hero's Sword.

If they went now, there would likely be so many people that they wouldn't even get the chance to try pulling it, and they might not even be able to see it from a distance.

Lakia offered to handle the crowd with her magic, but that would result in countless casualties.

There was no choice but to head to the inn first.

So Ariel's group moved towards the inn.

As they passed through an alley, they witnessed a scene where the city guards were trying to drive out a pair of homeless siblings.

After saving the siblings, Zion and Clara, and sharing some food with them, Ariel and her group arrived at their lodging.

It was the inn that the gate soldier had assigned to them.

Compared to the merchant-run inn in Sierra, the facilities were somewhat lacking, but they were fortunate it could accommodate Ghost.

Ariel didn't want Ghost staying in a place like a stable.

After releasing Ghost into the yard, Ariel headed to the bathroom to wash up.

As she undressed and turned on the hot water, steam filled the bathroom.

Ssshhhh.

Ariel stood under the hot water with her eyes closed.

The warm water relaxed her, making her feel as if all her fatigue was melting away, although she wasn't particularly tired to begin with.

Still, it felt nice and warm. She didn't want to move for the rest of her life.

Just as she thought that, she heard a voice.

"Ariel."

Startled, Ariel opened her eyes. Lakia's face was right in front of her.

"I'll wash you."

"?!"

Lakia was a dragon, and dragons didn't wear clothes.

The only reason Lakia wore a dress was because of her mother's request. She wasn't embarrassed to be naked in front of others.

But Ariel wasn't the same.

She wasn't prepared to see Lakia naked, nor was she comfortable showing her own body.

"Um, I'm fine..."

"Turn around, Ariel. I used to wash my mother all the time. Though, of course, she was in her dragon form."

Ariel reluctantly turned around, and Lakia began washing her skillfully.

From Lakia's perspective, washing the petite body of an elf was much easier than washing the massive body of a dragon.

Her mother used to enjoy having her back scratched, but when Lakia scratched Ariel's back, there was no reaction.

Ariel simply stood there, her head bowed in embarrassment, though Lakia didn't realize it.

After all, dragons didn't wear clothes.

The next day at dawn, Ariel's group went to attempt pulling the Hero's Sword.

The selection ceremony was ongoing day and night due to the sheer number of people.

In the morning, it was the turn of high-ranking nobles, and in the afternoon or early dawn, it was the turn of commoners and other races.

Ariel's group was composed entirely of non-humans.

Elf, dragon, fairy.

Although Lakia, in her human form, looked like an aristocratic young girl to others, some were confused when they saw her in the early dawn.

"Is she a commoner? But her clothes are so fancy..."

Anyway, it was still before sunrise.

Even though it was early, the area in front of Leonhardt's golden statue was still crowded with people.

"Hey! Line up properly!"

"Don't cut in line!"

"Ouch! Someone stepped on my foot!"

"Hey, stop pushing!"

These things didn't happen during the nobles' turn, but when commoners and non-humans gathered, chaos ensued.

Some people tried to cut in line, leading to fights, while others, in their eagerness to get a better view of the Hero's Sword, stepped on or shoved those in front of them.

"Stop causing trouble!"

The city guards of Gold Castle were working hard to control the crowd of commoners and non-humans.

"If you cause a disturbance, you'll be disqualified! Hey, you, the lizardman and the dwarf! Stop fighting! Damn it, drag them out of here!"

While chaos erupted around them, Ariel's group quietly waited their turn.

Ariel, half-asleep, had her eyes half-closed. Lakia glared at Leonhardt's statue with a haughty expression, and Rue was fast asleep inside Ariel's hat.

"Huh? Ariel?"

Suddenly, someone called out to Ariel from behind.

"You're here to pull the Hero's Sword too?"

When Ariel turned around, she saw a scruffy boy standing there.

It was Zion, the red-haired boy they had saved from the guards.

Behind him was his sister, Clara, her hair still hanging loosely.

“Sorry, Ariel, but I’m going to be the one to pull the Hero’s Sword. I have no intention of yielding.”

Ariel quietly nodded at Zion’s words.

She had no desire to become a hero. She simply wanted to see Excalibur and maybe try pulling it.

After all, the hero had always been chosen from among humans, so there was no chance Excalibur would choose Ariel.

Besides, Ariel was an elf right now.

“You’re at it again.”

Lakia glared at Zion.

“If you’re not going to yield, should I make you?”

A magic circle formed beneath Zion’s feet, and his face turned pale.

“I-It was just a joke. It’s not like I can decide who pulls it. It’s fair for everyone. Everyone has a chance.”

Lakia scoffed.

“How amusing, human. Do you really think you’ll have a chance? Either I or Ariel will pull the Hero’s Sword. Since you’re behind us, you won’t even have the opportunity.”

“B-But Ariel’s an elf. Up until now, the hero has always been a human.”

“That’s how it’s been, yes. But isn’t it arrogant to assume it will always be that way?”

When it came to arrogance, no race could rival dragons.

That’s why Lakia was confident she would be able to pull the Hero’s

Sword.

And if she couldn't, she was prepared to use magic or even blow up the city to ensure she got her hands on it.

Of course, Lakia had no real desire to become a hero.

This was just for fun.

While becoming a hero would grant one wealth and fame, such things held little meaning for a dragon.

A dragon could enjoy wealth and luxury whenever they wanted, hero or not.

“Hey! If you didn't pull it, move on! Next!”

The line gradually shortened, and finally, it was Ariel's group's turn.

“Ariel, may I try first?”

Lakia asked politely, and Ariel nodded readily.

“Just don't use magic.”

“Ah.”

Lakia's expression stiffened.

“Understood...”

Her plan was slightly derailed, but Ariel's words were absolute to Lakia.

Since Ariel said no magic, Lakia was determined to comply.

‘But surely using mana is fine, right?’

Lakia smiled slyly.

By channeling mana, she could enhance her physical abilities.

She could even temporarily boost her strength.

Although it wasn't a very efficient method.

Compared to casting magic, the increase in strength was minimal.

That's why those who wielded mana never bothered using it to enhance their physical prowess.

The amount of mana expended was large, but the results were negligible.

It was far more efficient to either train one's body or use magic.

But that was in normal circumstances.

Lakia's magic was restricted, and she was a dragon with an absurdly vast amount of mana. So it was worth trying.

Even in her polymorphed human form, Lakia's strength far surpassed that of a regular human.

If she poured all that massive mana into her physical strength?

'I can do it.'

Lakia confidently approached

the pedestal.

Before the statue of the previous hero, Leonhardt, the Hero's Sword, Excalibur, gleamed brilliantly, waiting for Lakia.

Chapter 48 : Gold Castle (4)

Lakia walked confidently and gripped the handle of Excalibur firmly.

With a spirited shout, she tried to pull it out with all her might.

However, Excalibur didn't budge.

Lakia was not a hero.

"Ugh!"

She gathered her mana as if it were exploding from her heart.

Her skirt fluttered, and a blue shimmer rose around her.

Her strength had now increased to the point where she could easily lift a boulder the size of a house.

But even with such strength, she couldn't pull out the Hero's Sword, Excalibur.

"Why won't it come out? This stupid sword...!"

Lakia refused to give up and kept tugging at the handle of Excalibur.

"Come on, just get out!"

"Hey! Stop! If you can't pull it out after all that, it's not happening!"

One of the guards shouted at her.

"You're not the hero!"

"Damn it...!"

Exhausted, Lakia slumped to the ground.

“But I’m a dragon...”

“What are you talking about? If you can’t pull it out, just move on! Next!”

The guard brusquely shooed her away, and Lakia walked back to where Ariel was, her steps heavy with defeat.

“Ariel, I’m sorry... I wanted to pull that stupid sword out so impressively... but it just wouldn’t come out... Sniff...”

In the end, Lakia burst into tears.

It wasn’t just about not pulling the sword, but the fear that Ariel might be disappointed in her made her feel even more sorrowful.

“It’s okay, Lakia.”

At that moment, a small creature popped out from under Ariel’s hat and perched on Lakia’s shoulder.

“That sword is only for the chosen hero.”

It was Lu.

Having been asleep inside Ariel’s hat, Lu had awoken just in time to see Lakia’s failed attempt.

“You don’t need the Hero’s Sword. You’re stronger than any hero anyway. Because you’re a dragon.”

“Sniff, Lu...”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t cry, there there.”

Lu wiped away Lakia’s tears, and Ariel quietly approached and patted her on the head.

“You did well, Lakia.”

Ariel hadn’t expected Lakia to pull out Excalibur anyway.

Excalibur was a sword only those chosen by the gods could wield.

No matter how powerful a dragon was, they couldn't defy the gods.

"Ariel..."

Lakia, trying hard to stop crying, spoke.

"I may have failed, but I know you'll definitely pull out that sword, Ariel. You're much stronger than me..."

"..."

Ariel wasn't so sure, but she turned around nonetheless.

She walked briskly towards Excalibur, which still shone brilliantly, embedded in the ground.

'So, this is the Hero's Sword...'

Ariel felt a bit emotional as she gripped the handle of the sword.

She felt something strange.

Maybe because it was a divine weapon, she thought she could sense some kind of sacred aura.

Ariel applied a little strength and tried to pull the sword's handle.

But Excalibur didn't budge.

This meant Ariel wasn't the hero either.

At that moment, a thought crossed Ariel's mind, similar to what Lakia had thought earlier.

Even if she wasn't the chosen hero, couldn't she just pull it out with sheer force?

Ariel's strength stat was limitless.

Not just strong, but immeasurably so.

So, maybe, just maybe, it was possible.

Ariel applied more strength and pulled on Excalibur's handle again.

Woom...!

There was a strange resistance from the handle of the sword.

It felt almost magical, something indescribable, but Ariel felt like she could break through it with raw strength.

She gave it more power.

Woom!!

The resistance in the sword's handle trembled precariously, as if it couldn't withstand Ariel's strength.

Ariel began to feel like she could actually pull it out with force.

She gripped Excalibur's handle firmly and pulled with all her might.

More strength than she had ever exerted before.

Crrrack!!

Suddenly, with a sound like something breaking, Excalibur moved.

"...!"

Ariel was slightly shocked.

She had been doubtful, but now Excalibur was really coming out.

The resistance was completely gone, and the blade was halfway out of the ground.

Ariel glanced around.

At that moment, a fight had broken out in the back, and the guards were distracted.

Ariel quickly shoved Excalibur back into the ground.

She had pulled it out out of curiosity, but something about it felt

wrong.

If people misunderstood her as the hero, she would draw too much attention.

That would be exhausting, and it might make her adventures more complicated.

Now that she knew it could be pulled out with strength, that was enough.

Ariel let go of the handle and turned to leave.

But then, a voice called out from behind.

“Hey, wait...!”

She looked back slightly and saw one of the guards staring at her in shock.

“You, you just... You did, didn’t you? You just pulled it out, didn’t you?”

It seemed this guard had witnessed Ariel pulling Excalibur.

“You just pulled it out! I saw it! You pulled it out a little and then put it back in! Right? I’m sure! I definitely saw it!!”

The guard shouted excitedly, but Ariel shook her head, feigning ignorance.

“What? She’s an elf, though...”

Other guards clicked their tongues.

“How could an elf pull the Hero’s Sword? That doesn’t make sense.”

The other guards hadn’t seen Ariel pull Excalibur.

When she had done it, they had all been focused on the fight among the commoners in the queue.

But the one guard who had seen it was insistent.

“No! I’m telling you, she pulled it out! That elf pulled it out a little and then put it back! Didn’t you guys see? She’s the hero! That elf is the hero!!”

Despite the guard’s desperate claims, no one believed him.

Instead, they responded with concern, asking if he was feeling okay and suggesting he might be tired.

And so, Ariel was able to keep up her act of innocence.

“Enough nonsense. We’re tired enough as it is from this dawn shift. Next!”

The guards let Ariel go.

She returned safely to her spot, and it was now Zion’s turn.

‘I’m the hero.’

Zion thought as he walked toward Excalibur.

‘I have to become the hero.’

His expression was grim with determination.

‘I have to become the hero to protect Clara.’

Zion and his younger sister Clara had been abandoned by their parents when they were little.

Since then, they had lived as homeless wanderers, barely surviving.

But in reality, their life wasn’t much of a life at all.

Begging for food and shivering in the cold as they slept on the streets.

It had been a harsh life for the young siblings.

Zion wanted nothing more than to give his sister Clara a warm home and plenty of food.

She was his only sister, after all.

They said a hero would enjoy wealth and glory.

If he became the hero, they would no longer have to live as vagrants.

They wouldn't have to flee from the city guards or fear being kidnapped by slave traders.

They could live a good life together.

'So please...'

Zion, with all his heart, grabbed the handle of Excalibur and pulled with all his might.

'Please, just come out!'

Sssring!

Excalibur slid out smoothly.

"...?"

Zion, the guards, and everyone in the line wore stunned expressions.

"I-I pulled it out...?"

Zion muttered in disbelief.

He couldn't believe what had just happened. His legs gave out in a mix of shock and exhaustion.

"The hero..."

One of the guards finally managed to speak.

"The hero has appeared..."

Then, others began to shout one by one.

"The hero has appeared..."

"The hero has appeared!"

Cheers erupted from all around.

The surroundings descended into chaos in an instant.

The guards hurried to report to their superiors, and the crowd surged forward to get a look at Zion.

Zion stood there, still holding Excalibur, looking completely bewildered.

“Wow, the hero!”

“That little vagrant boy was chosen as the hero!”

In his whole life, Zion had never experienced so many eyes on him.

And up until now, the gazes he had received had always been filled with disdain and disgust.

But not now.

Now, everyone was looking at Zion with awe.

And why wouldn't they?

Zion was the hero.

The one chosen by the gods.

‘I... I'm the hero...!’

Zion lifted Excalibur high above his head.

A thunderous roar erupted from the crowd.

“Wooooaaah!!”

“The hero!!”

Before the golden statue of Leonhardt, a new hero stood holding Excalibur aloft.

He was a boy, about ten years old.

“All hail the hero!!”

As the sun slowly began to rise, a new dawn arrived.

Chapter 49 : Gold Castle (5)

As soon as the hero was born, Gold Castle was filled with excitement throughout the day.

Everyone blessed the birth of the hero, and festivals were held everywhere in the streets.

However, Ariel just slept in her accommodation.

She slept deeply until the evening, then bought some desserts from the bakery in front of the lodging, ate them, and went back to sleep.

Aside from pulling out the hero's sword at dawn, she spent the entire day doing nothing.

Someone might think she was being lazy, but none of her companions thought that way.

After all, dragons and fairies were inherently lazy species.

While adventures were nice, lounging in bed doing absolutely nothing was just as enjoyable.

The same was true for Ghost, the wolf.

Since they were in the city anyway, Ghost preferred lounging in the yard under the sun rather than wandering around crowded human places.

Fireworks burst and cheers rang out from outside, but Ariel's lodging was as quiet as if it belonged to a different world.

Then, the next morning, a visitor arrived at the peaceful lodging.

Knock knock.

At the sound of knocking, Lakia opened the door with magic.

Standing in front of the door was Sion.

“Oh, this is the place. I’ve been looking for it for a while. Mind if I come in for a bit?”

At Sion’s request, Lakia nodded.

At that moment, only Lakia was inside, while Ariel and Lu were in the yard, sleeping with Ghost in their arms.

“This place must be expensive. Are you staying here because of the wolf?”

Sion said as he looked around the room, and Lakia sat on the bed with her arms crossed, glaring at him.

“State your business, human. If it’s trivial, I’ll turn you into ashes immediately.”

Noticing the magic circle drawn at her feet, Sion showed a slightly bewildered expression.

The way people treated Sion outside had completely changed.

Originally, he was just a little vagrant, but now he had become the only chosen one on the continent, a hero selected by the gods.

No one treated Sion poorly anymore.

After all, in the upcoming war against the demons, it was Sion who would save humanity.

But none of that mattered to Lakia.

To Lakia, whether a hero or an emperor, humans were just inferior beings.

“...Could you at least get rid of this magic circle first? It’s making me nervous.”

Sion said with a pale face.

Even though he was the hero, Sion had only pulled out Excalibur the day before.

He hadn't yet felt any real sense of newfound strength, and, more importantly, he hadn't even bonded with Excalibur yet.

It was said that heroes would form a bond with Excalibur.

No one knew exactly how it worked, but the previous hero, Leonhardt, was said to have often conversed with the sword on his own.

Excalibur was supposed to lend the hero its power and give advice, but Sion had yet to experience any of that.

Everyone praised Sion as a hero, but he himself didn't feel any different.

The people from the imperial capital had provided him with lodging, food, luxurious clothing, and a great deal of money, but Sion still felt no different from when he was a vagrant.

As a result, Lakia's magic circle remained a threat to Sion.

"Hmph."

Lakia, on the other hand, didn't particularly like Sion.

There was no specific reason; she just didn't like the fact that Sion had pulled out the hero's sword, something she hadn't been able to do.

The fact that a mere human had achieved what she couldn't wounded her dragon pride.

Even so, Lakia didn't conjure a pillar of fire beneath Sion's feet, as it seemed Ariel didn't want to cause any trouble.

Ariel appeared to prefer resolving situations peacefully, and Lakia followed her will.

With a wave of Lakia's hand, the glowing magic circle beneath Sion's

feet vanished.

Only then did Sion let out a sigh of relief and begin to explain his purpose.

“Do you remember what I said before? I promised to repay your kindness for helping me.”

Lakia gave a slight nod.

“And?”

“I’ve come to repay that kindness. There’s a banquet tonight to celebrate the birth of the hero. I’d like to invite you all. Normally, only nobles are allowed to attend, but I can invite family and friends. There will be lots of delicious food, of course. After all, this is Gold Castle, the wealthiest city in the empire. Naturally, the banquet will be quite luxurious.”

“Hmm...”

Lakia scratched her head.

For a moment, she thought, ‘What’s so great about a human banquet?’ but the mention of delicious food piqued her interest.

“I’ll ask Lady Ariel when she wakes up.”

“Thanks. Here’s the invitation.”

Sion handed her the invitation.

Lakia took it and examined it quietly.

It was a luxurious-looking invitation with details about the banquet’s location and start time.

“I really hope you’ll come.”

Sion said with an awkward smile.

Ariel woke up a few hours later.

When she woke, Lakia told her about Sion's invitation to the banquet.

As Ariel looked at the invitation, Lu muttered beside her.

"That kid, he's really hit it big. I had a feeling he'd actually become the hero..."

"Hmph."

Lakia scoffed.

"He just got lucky. If I had used my magic, I would've been the one to pull out the hero's sword. I'm certain. But Lady Ariel, are you going to the banquet?"

"Yeah."

Ariel gave a small nod.

Since Sion had gone out of his way to bring them an invitation, there was no reason not to go.

Besides, there would be plenty of delicious food at the banquet.

The last time they attended Sierra's banquet, the chocolate cake had been especially tasty.

Remembering the taste of that cake, it seemed only right to go.

But there was one problem.

"What about Ghost, though? It might be difficult to bring a wolf like him to a gathering of human nobles."

At Lu's remark, Ariel glanced at Ghost.

Indeed, bringing such a large wolf to the banquet would be difficult. People would definitely be scared and on guard.

"If you'd like, I can stay here with Ghost. You and Lakia can go to the banquet. Besides, I find being around humans tiring anyway."

Lu said with a bright smile, and Ghost also nodded slightly as if

agreeing that it was a good idea.

Ariel wasn't too thrilled about it, but since the banquet wasn't going to last that long, she figured it would be fine to go for just a little while.

"Thank you, Lu, Ghost."

Ariel petted both Ghost and Lu at the same time.

Ghost calmly closed his eyes as if he was used to it, while Lu squirmed bashfully, looking embarrassed.

The sun was setting.

Ariel packed plenty of meat and fruit wine for Ghost and Lu, then left the lodging with Lakia to attend the banquet.

Even though the banquet location was written on the invitation, it was Ariel and Lakia's first time in Gold Castle, so finding their way wasn't easy.

They wandered for a while before Lakia grabbed a passing coachman, brandishing the invitation and demanding directions.

"Take us here immediately, human. Or else..."

It was more of a threat than a request, but when Ariel pulled out some gold coins from her inventory, the coachman happily let them board the carriage.

After traveling in the coachman's carriage for a bit, the banquet hall came into view.

It was a grand mansion owned by the Baraton family, decorated with dazzling splendor, and almost as large as a palace.

It was so luxurious that any commoner would be overwhelmed at a glance.

Ariel and Lakia got out of the carriage in front of the mansion.

At the entrance to the mansion stood a massive iron gate guarded by soldiers.

As Ariel and Lakia approached, the soldiers scrutinized them with sharp eyes.

Most of the banquet attendees were high-ranking nobles, dressed elegantly in fine clothing.

From the guard's perspective, Lakia was dressed reasonably well, but Ariel's attire was hardly suitable for a banquet.

She wore the simple clothes of an adventurer.

No one had arrived at the banquet dressed like that today.

Moreover, Ariel and Lakia were alone, without any escort knights or servants.

They were young, too, and more importantly...

‘An elf?’

Poking out from Ariel's silver hair were pointed ears.

That meant she wasn't human, but an elf.

With a stern expression, the guard blocked Ariel and Lakia's path.

Occasionally, guests who hadn't been invited would try to attend such banquets.

Some came to eat the food for free, while others had suspicious motives or other reasons.

To prevent such situations, the guards were paid to protect the venue.

It was only natural, then, for the guard to block Ariel and Lakia.

“May I see your invitation, please?”

Although Ariel and Lakia looked young, the guard still spoke politely.

He couldn't yet determine their exact status.

At his request, Lakia fumbled through her dress pocket.

Then, with a flustered expression, she looked at Ariel.

"Lady Ariel, the, uh, invitation... it's gone. I think we left it in the carriage."

"....."

The guard's gaze grew cold as he looked at Ariel and Lakia.

Chapter 50 : Gold Castle (6)

“If you don’t have the invitation, you can’t enter the banquet.”

The guard spoke firmly, raising his spear. It was a clear sign that if they tried to force their way in, he would stop them by any means necessary.

“But we were invited!” Lakia shouted.

“We just lost the invitation! We had it until a moment ago, but we must have left it in the carriage!”

“...Even so, it doesn’t matter. Rules are rules. We were ordered not to let anyone without an invitation pass.”

“Haa...”

Lakia sighed and glanced at Ariel.

Ariel wore a slightly sad expression. She was thinking about how they couldn’t enter the banquet without the invitation, and what that meant for the chocolate cake she had been anticipating.

Seeing Ariel’s expression, Lakia shot the guard a cold glare.

“Then we have no choice. We’ll force our way in.”

Lakia began to summon her mana, and a blue aura started to swirl around her.

“I’ll show you what happens when you dare to stop Lady Ariel, human.”

“...?”

The guard flinched, quickly preparing to defend himself, while Ariel

tried to calm Lakia down. If Lakia used magic here, it would cause a huge commotion.

At that moment, a voice called out from behind them.

“Ariel!”

They turned to see Sion standing there.

“You really came!”

Sion approached with a bright smile. His appearance had completely changed—his hair was neatly styled, and he wore luxurious clothing. At his waist hung Excalibur, the symbol of the hero.

“Thanks for coming!”

Beside him was a neatly dressed young girl.

“Hello...”

The girl bowed her head slightly.

It was Sion’s younger sister, Clara.

Clara, who had once looked ragged with her disheveled hair, was now completely transformed. Her hair was neatly braided, and she wore a dress, looking like a noble young lady.

“What are you doing, just standing here?” Sion asked, looking between Ariel, Lakia, and the guard.

Lakia pointed at the guard like she was tattling.

“He won’t let us in because we don’t have the invitation. How rude.”

“Invitation?” Sion tilted his head.

“Didn’t I give you one?”

“We lost it.”

“Ah.”

Sion chuckled and turned to the guard.

“It seems my friends lost their invitation. Can they come in with me?”

The guard’s demeanor had already changed. He now stood with perfect politeness, his expression stiff with tension.

And for good reason—every high-ranking noble in Gold Castle was treating Sion with utmost respect. In the empire, a hero was such an important figure, almost on par with royalty in terms of power.

It wasn’t easy for a mere guard to deal with someone of Sion’s status.

“You may enter. I didn’t realize they were your friends, Hero. I sincerely apologize.”

Though the guard had only been doing his job, he knew there were instances where situations like this could escalate. Some ill-tempered nobles might slap a guard for such offenses, spit in their face, or even get them fired.

Of course, Sion wasn’t that kind of person.

Up until a few days ago, he had been a vagrant, and the guard’s excessive politeness made him feel a bit uncomfortable.

“It’s fine, haha. Thank you, and keep up the good work.”

Sion nodded deeply to the guard, then led Ariel, Lakia, and his sister Clara into the banquet hall.

“Hmph, you’re lucky,” Lakia muttered as she tapped the guard on the shoulder.

She meant it—if things had gone differently, the guard might have found himself standing on a pillar of fire, though he had no way of knowing that.

“Isn’t that her? The elf from back then?”

“Yeah, that’s her, no doubt. The one who took down Corbin in

Sierra.”

“What is she doing here? And why is she with the hero? Is she not content with the Sword Prince and now after the hero too?”

“Seems that way. Men sure do love elves.”

“So, what happens to the Sword Prince now?”

“He’ll probably end up fighting the hero over her.”

“Oh my, how romantic.”

“What? Seriously?”

As they entered the banquet hall, some noble ladies whispered among themselves, recognizing Ariel from the previous banquet in Sierra.

Many of the nobles attending had also been present at that event, and they immediately knew who Ariel was. However, neither Selly nor Kal were in attendance this time. Both had returned to their respective families after the princess’s birthday party.

“Lady Ariel, shall we try that? No, wait, look at that huge piece of meat! Did they roast a whole minotaur? It might just be human food, but still, it looks tasty!”

Lakia’s face lit up as she looked around excitedly.

Indeed, this was the banquet hall of Gold Castle, a wealthy city.

The food spread out was grand and bountiful, enough to leave one in awe.

“I, I’m going for that...”

Ariel pointed toward the dessert table.

There stood a towering chocolate cake, almost like a giant tower of sweetness.

While Lakia preferred meat, Ariel was drawn to the sweet desserts.

So, Lakia headed toward the meat, while Ariel made a beeline for the dessert.

“Thank you all for coming to celebrate the birth of the hero. I hope you all have a wonderful time.”

The head of the Baraton family, the host of the banquet, gave a brief speech, and the sound of musical instruments filled the hall as the event began in earnest.

Ariel scooped a large slice of the chocolate cake onto a plate and sat down to enjoy it.

A smile spread across her face as she stared at the cake on her plate—a smile filled with pure happiness.

Meanwhile, Lakia was glaring at the young noble boys who had surrounded her.

The boys, attracted by Lakia’s beauty, awkwardly introduced themselves and asked for a dance, but Lakia rejected them harshly.

“Get lost, inferior humans.”

If any of the boys had been more assertive, they might have retorted, but instead, they all flinched and backed away, visibly hurt by her sharp words.

After driving off the noble boys, Lakia approached Ariel, carrying a plate piled high with meat.

“Lady Ariel, human banquets are actually quite fun.”

Despite having just wounded the pride of several young nobles, Lakia wore a bright smile.

“All this delicious food to eat—I think we should come to these more often.”

This banquet was meant to celebrate the birth of the hero and also to strengthen the ties between the nobles through socializing.

But neither Ariel nor Lakia cared about any of that.

Their only interest was the food.

Ariel stabbed her fork into the chocolate cake and stuffed a large bite into her mouth.

The sweet flavor filled her mouth.

She remembered Selly's words about a taste so good it felt like her brain was melting.

It wasn't quite that intense, but it was sweet enough to feel like her tongue was melting. It was exactly the kind of flavor Ariel loved.

Munch, munch.

Ariel focused on devouring her chocolate cake, while Lakia tore into her meat with equal enthusiasm.

They were enjoying their time when someone approached them.

"Hello?"

A voice soft yet full of elegance.

Ariel looked up, her mouth full of cake.

A man with light blonde hair and a long face was smiling down at her.

"My name is Jerome. I'm the eldest son of the Baraton family and Corbin's older brother. I heard what my brother did to you at the banquet in Sierra. It was very rude of him."

Jerome smiled as he continued.

"Even though he's my brother, he's a thoughtless fool. After you knocked him down, he couldn't get up for a while, but I think he deserved it."

Ariel tilted her head in confusion.

The name Corbin didn't ring any bells, but she vaguely remembered fighting someone at the Sierra banquet. She hadn't beaten him that badly, though, just one punch.

"Anyway, I'd like to apologize on his behalf for his rudeness."

Jerome smiled as he spoke.

"I'm sorry. I'll make sure to keep him in line from now on. Will you forgive him?"

Ariel nodded.

She didn't remember who Corbin was, and she wasn't holding a grudge. So, it was easy to forgive and move on.

This way, Jerome would leave, and she could go back to enjoying her cake.

Meanwhile, Sion, who had been surrounded by nobles inside the banquet hall, stepped out onto the terrace for some fresh air.

In reality, he was escaping. He found the way the nobles treated him overwhelming.

Just days ago, he had been a vagrant, but now they hailed him as the hero who would save the continent. It didn't feel real to Sion.

To be honest, he didn't feel confident he could fight if the demons attacked right now.

He had spent his whole life as a vagrant and had never wielded a sword before.

Shing.

Sion drew Excalibur from his waist and stared at it.

"Am I really the hero?"

When he first heard about the hero selection ceremony, he had been filled with excitement.

Becoming the hero meant leaving behind his life as a vagrant.

He wouldn't have to let Clara starve anymore, and they wouldn't have to suffer in the cold.

He had been so determined to pull out Excalibur that he could hardly sleep.

But now that it had actually happened, he couldn't quite accept it.

"Why was I chosen?"

He didn't have any complaints about his current situation.

The people from the imperial capital were treating him very well, and he was enjoying a life of luxury he had never experienced before.

Soon, he would go

to the imperial capital for his hero training, where he would even stay in the royal palace.

The royal palace—something he could never have dreamed of as a vagrant.

And yet, Sion couldn't bring himself to be completely happy because of a growing sense of unease.

What if he wasn't really the hero?

What if something had gone wrong, and he had just gotten lucky enough to pull out Excalibur without truly deserving it?

That thought had been nagging at him, and it was because he still hadn't bonded with Excalibur.

The previous hero, Leonhardt, had spoken with Excalibur, but Sion hadn't experienced anything like that.

Whenever he tried to talk to Excalibur, it felt like he was just muttering to himself.

So, the more time passed, the more Sion began to doubt.

Maybe I'm not really the hero, he thought.

“Haa...”

Sion sighed as he tried to sheathe Excalibur again.

Regardless of his doubts, everyone believed he was the hero.

So, he had to keep up the act.

Otherwise, he would be nothing more than the little vagrant he used to be.

[...Hey, kid...]

Just as Excalibur was about to slide back into its sheath, a voice echoed in Sion's mind.

[Can you... hear me...?]

Chapter 51 : Gold Castle (7)

“???”

Sion was utterly bewildered.

Hearing a voice in his head all of a sudden—this was a strange feeling he had never experienced before.

‘No way.’

Sion’s gaze turned to Excalibur, which he was holding in his hand.

In this situation, if he heard a voice in his head, there could only be one cause.

Resonance.

Finally, the resonance with Excalibur had happened.

Sion asked Excalibur, “Was it you who just spoke to me?”

[Yes... it was...]

“Oh!”

A smile spread across Sion’s lips.

“Why did it take you so long to talk to me? I was so anxious! I was starting to wonder if I wasn’t the hero after all...”

[You are not the hero...]

“Huh?”

[You are not the hero... You were not chosen by the gods...]

“.....?”

It felt as though Sion had been hit over the head with a hammer.

Finally, he had connected with Excalibur, but now he was being told he wasn't the hero?

"Wait, hold on a second... If I wasn't chosen by the gods, then how did I even draw you? Shouldn't I have been unable to pull you out?"

[Well, that's because...]

Excalibur seemed to struggle with its words.

[The barrier was broken, and that elf... used brute strength... It's absurd...]

At that moment, a piercing scream echoed from the banquet hall.

Sion turned his gaze towards the hall and, through the window, his eyes met something inside.

A massive creature standing on four legs.

It looked like a rhinoceros, but it was anything but ordinary.

A menacing horn sprouted from its head, its tail was lined with sharp spikes, and its body was a dark, crimson red.

A demonic beast.

A creature that only exists in the demon realm.

Demonic beasts can't appear in this world unless summoned by a demon.

In other words, there was a demon nearby, and the target was likely Sion.

Because Sion was the hero.

He was the one who would fight in place of humanity if a war broke out against the demons.

They must have been trying to eliminate him early.

The demonic beast began charging.

It was headed straight for Sion.

“H-Huh?!”

Sion, pale-faced, stepped back, and soon his back hit the terrace railing.

There was nowhere to run. No, he couldn't run.

Sion was the hero.

Even though Excalibur had just told him that he wasn't chosen, right now, he was the hero with Excalibur in his hand.

He couldn't run. He had to defeat the demonic beast somehow.

[It's a Behemoth... quite a high-ranking demonic beast... Kid, can you handle that thing?]

At Excalibur's question, Sion's expression turned teary-eyed.

That was exactly what Sion wanted to ask.

How could he, who hadn't even been chosen by the gods, defeat a demonic beast?

Sion had only ever held Excalibur, never once swinging it at anyone.

[You have to do it. Even though the process of you drawing me was... ambiguous, this is still destiny. Now that you've drawn me, you have to do it. Defeat that thing and become the hero.]

Excalibur's voice had become clearer now, as if it had finally regained its composure.

“How am I supposed to do that? I've never used a sword before.”

[Stay calm, kid. I'll lend you my power. Even Leonhardt wasn't great from the start.]

“I-I can't stay calm...”

Crash!

The demonic beast broke through the terrace window and leapt out.

Sion almost screamed but bit down hard, barely holding it in.

[First, hold me straight.]

Sion lifted Excalibur straight.

[Stand with your legs apart and focus. Breathe slowly. Yes, that's it.]

Sion desperately calmed his breathing and focused.

He felt a surge of energy welling up inside his body.

His muscles tightened, and the trembling in his body began to subside.

A moment ago, he wanted to flee, but now, a strange confidence began to grow inside him.

Sion glared at the demonic beast, and it glared back at him.

With a leap, the demonic beast charged at Sion.

Sion tightened his grip on the sword.

And the moment the demonic beast reached him, he swung the sword with a shout.

“Hah!”

Excalibur sliced through the demonic beast's body vertically.

Slash!

The demonic beast, charging forward, was split in two, then dissipated into black smoke.

“Huff, huff...”

Sion gasped for breath.

The people from the banquet hall came rushing in.

The demonic beast's body was dissolving into black smoke, and Sion's body was glowing gold.

"The... hero..."

Someone murmured softly.

A glowing golden body was a defining characteristic of a hero.

The previous hero, Leonhardt, also shone brilliantly in gold whenever he fought.

In other words, Sion had now truly become a hero.

And everyone had witnessed it.

They had all seen Sion defeat the demonic beast.

"The hero defeated the beast!"

"Wow, the hero is amazing!"

"Long live the hero!!"

The people cheered and clapped, and Sion, with an awkward smile, sheathed Excalibur.

The demonic beast that had attacked Sion was a high-ranking beast called *Behemoth*, a dangerous creature that had devoured many humans during the war with the demons.

Its horn could break down city gates, its spiked tail had slaughtered countless humans, and its skin was so tough that neither magic nor ordinary swords could wound it.

The fact that someone had summoned a Behemoth meant there was a skilled demon at the banquet, but unfortunately, the demon had not been caught.

It was assumed that the demon had escaped while the Behemoth rampaged.

In any case, one thing had become clear.

The demons were targeting the hero, which meant they were preparing for war.

Peace would not last long.

It was highly likely that the demons would soon wage war again.

In that sense, the birth of a hero was a fortunate event.

Fighting the demons without a hero would result in severe losses.

The banquet was canceled.

There was no way they could continue celebrating when a demonic beast had been summoned to target the hero.

The hero had to move to the imperial capital immediately.

He needed to stay in a safer place and undergo hero training to prepare for the war with the demons.

“Hey, Ariel.”

Sion approached Ariel.

Originally, they were supposed to leave for the imperial capital the next morning, but given the situation, it was decided they would leave immediately.

Sion intended to say his goodbyes to Ariel.

“Ariel?”

Ariel was sitting quietly in a chair.

Her eyes were closed, her head tilted slightly, and she wasn't moving.

She was breathing softly.

It seemed she was asleep.

‘She’s sleeping... in all this...’

The banquet hall had turned into chaos when the demonic beast appeared.

People had screamed, food had been thrown everywhere, and when Sion defeated the beast, everyone had clapped and cheered.

But through all that commotion, Ariel had been peacefully sleeping.

Beside her, Lakia was also asleep, resting her head on Ariel’s shoulder.

Ariel had a fork in her hand, and Lakia was holding something that looked like a bone.

‘What are these two doing?’

Sion looked at them in disbelief for a moment before gently shaking them awake.

He felt a little guilty waking them since they seemed to be sleeping so well, but the banquet was over, and Sion had to leave.

“Hmm, what is it, human... How dare you wake a sleeping dragon... You are impertinent...”

Lakia mumbled, her eyes barely open, and Ariel blinked drowsily, her gaze unfocused.

“Hey, the banquet’s over.”

“Is that so...?”

Lakia lifted her head groggily and shook it, trying to wake up.

Ariel, on the other hand, just sat there, blinking her eyes.

“By the way, a demonic beast appeared earlier. Did you know about that?”

“A demonic beast...? A demonic beast appeared?”

Lakia tilted her head in confusion, and Ariel looked at Sion silently.

‘As I thought, they didn’t know.’

Sion was certain.

Ariel and Lakia hadn’t even realized a demonic beast had appeared—they had slept through the entire ordeal.

Sion decided not to ask how that was possible.

From the beginning, there had been many things about Ariel and Lakia that were hard for Sion to understand.

“Anyway, I have to go now. I’ll be heading to the imperial capital to begin my hero training. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

“There’s no need for goodbyes, human. Just go.”

Lakia waved him off dismissively.

Sion couldn’t help but smile.

He had somewhat expected Lakia to react this way.

He had also anticipated Ariel’s response.

Ariel would likely say nothing at all.

But that didn’t bother him. It seemed like that was just her personality.

“Goodbye, Sion.”

But Ariel surprised him by waving and saying goodbye.

She even called him by his name.

“See you next time.”

Sion’s eyes grew misty with emotion just from that.

“Y-Yeah, thanks. See you next time, definitely...”

Sion murmured in a choked voice, then turned around quickly.

His face flushed without him realizing it, and for some reason, he felt like crying.

But he didn't want to show such a foolish side of himself.

After all, he was now truly a hero.

‘Yes, I’m a hero.’

Ariel and Lakia might not seem to acknowledge it, but Sion was a hero.

He might be young and inexperienced now, but things would be different the next time they met.

By then, Sion would have the dignity befitting a hero.

One's role shapes who they become, after all.

By that time, Ariel and Lakia might find it difficult to interact with him.

They might shrink back, overwhelmed by his heroic presence.

Not that he wished for that, but Sion thought it would be amusing if it happened.

[S-Sion...]

It was then.

As Sion was walking away, Excalibur spoke.

[Th-The elf... be careful... Don't ever mess with that elf... Got it...?]

“Huh?”

Sion tilted his head.

“Do you mean Ariel? Why?”

[.....]

Excalibur said nothing more.

Excalibur, who had never backed down even before the Demon King or dragons, was now feeling immense fear towards a single elf.

Chapter 52 : Gold Castle (8)

The banquet was satisfying enough.

Ariel and Lakia had eaten to their hearts' content and had slept well, leaving the banquet hall.

Although they had arrived in a carriage, they had to walk back as there were no carriages around.

This time, there was no worry about getting lost. They knew the location of their lodging precisely.

From anywhere in Gold Castle, you can see the statue of the former hero, Leonhardt.

The statue was enormous and even made of gold, making it easy to spot even at night. As long as they followed the statue's direction, they wouldn't have a problem finding their way.

Ariel arrived at their lodging shortly after and headed straight to the courtyard.

Even though she had slept well at the banquet hall, she still felt a bit drowsy from eating.

At times like this, there was nothing better than snuggling into Ghost's soft and fluffy fur for a nap. There was no greater happiness.

But...

"Hm?"

Ariel stopped at the courtyard's entrance and tilted her head in confusion.

The courtyard was desolate.

Normally, Lu would be sprawled out on a rock, drunk on fruit wine, while Ghost would wag his tail to greet her.

But now, the courtyard was empty.

Ariel slowly walked forward and ran her hand over the grass.

Something damp stuck to her hand.

It was red liquid.

Blood.

The courtyard was stained with a large amount of blood.

It looked as if a battle had taken place.

“Human blood... and Ghost’s blood too...”

Lakia muttered from beside her.

Lakia, being a dragon, could tell whose blood it was just by scent.

“It seems that both humans and Ghost shed blood here, Ariel.”

At Lakia’s words, Ariel quietly looked around.

Suddenly, she spotted something stuck to the courtyard wall.

It was a piece of paper.

Taah!

Ariel swiftly moved toward the wall.

She moved so fast that even Lakia, a dragon, couldn’t keep up with her with her eyes.

To Lakia, it looked like Ariel had disappeared from her spot and reappeared again.

Ariel, who normally moved slowly, was now moving with exceptional speed.

That's how disturbed Ariel was.

Ariel looked at the piece of paper on the wall.

On it was written:

-If you want to retrieve the wolf and fairy, come to the location listed below –

“Hmph, what a foolish elf girl.”

A boy muttered.

“To come to Gold Castle so recklessly, it's perfect.”

The boy had a golden bowl-cut hairstyle with protruding cheekbones.

He was Corbin, the second son of the Baraton family.

In the past, Corbin had challenged Ariel to a duel at Sierra's banquet.

Though he appeared frail on the outside, Corbin had trained in ancient martial arts, and because of that, he was confident he could defeat Ariel in a duel.

The thought that he could lose never crossed his mind.

After all, Ariel was just a small girl who happened to be an elf.

He was convinced that his mastery of *Tanglangquan* would allow him to easily defeat Ariel.

But the outcome was unexpected.

Corbin, who attacked Ariel, had his wrist broken instead. He was sent flying by a simple backhand from Ariel, resulting in multiple fractures across his body.

Corbin was humiliated. He became known as a weakling who couldn't even defeat a girl his own age.

Even his *Tanglangquan* became a joke.

Though Corbin believed *Tanglangquan* to be an exceptional martial art, people merely mocked it as a series of pointless, bizarre movements.

“Of course, you got beaten up by a girl because of those ridiculous moves... Honestly, you’re a disgrace to the family.”

The Baraton family members were quick to ridicule Corbin.

Even his father, the head of the family, was so ashamed that he barred Corbin from attending future banquets.

Of course, even without that restriction, Corbin wouldn’t have been able to leave his bed.

His body had been too damaged from Ariel’s blow, requiring extensive treatment that left him unable to move.

During his recovery, Corbin constantly thought of Ariel.

Her expressionless gaze, her pointed ears, her silver hair...

In truth, based on looks alone, Ariel was Corbin’s type. But that didn’t matter.

Corbin was set on revenge.

She had humiliated him and left his body in this condition.

The Baraton family’s crest was a lion. And a lion never forgets a grudge.

“I’ll show her what happens when you mess with a lion cub...!”

Corbin would mutter such things every day while bedridden.

Whenever something happened, Corbin would liken himself to a “lion cub,” though no one agreed with this comparison.

If anything, people might consider Jerome, the Baraton family’s eldest son, to be a lion cub, but certainly not Corbin.

Corbin was just Corbin. Petty and pathetic.

In any case, Corbin recovered surprisingly quickly, considering his entire body had been fractured.

The Baraton family was wealthy, and even though Corbin was a disgrace, they spared no expense for his treatment.

Thanks to high-grade potions and skilled priests who treated him daily, Corbin was soon able to walk around freely again.

Though he still needed crutches when walking, it was far better than being confined to bed.

Once he was up, the first thing Corbin did was hire a group of mercenaries.

It wasn't for preparing for a war or anything like that. It was simply to get revenge on Ariel.

He needed people to kidnap Ariel.

Despite being the family disgrace, Corbin's father didn't skimp on his allowance.

With that money, Corbin secretly hired a mercenary group.

The group was called *Crow*, made up of about fifty men, and they were notorious in Gold Castle.

Kidnapping, drugs, murder—if it made them money, they would do it. They were exactly the type of mercenary group Corbin was looking for.

Corbin tasked *Crow* with finding Ariel.

A young elf girl with silver hair and red eyes.

It wasn't a common appearance, and *Crow* quickly found Ariel.

They confirmed that Ariel had arrived in Gold Castle shortly after the hero selection ceremony began.

“As expected of *Crow*!”

Corbin highly praised *Crow*, though in truth, it had been mere coincidence that they found Ariel.

Ariel had drawn attention by walking around with a giant silver wolf, and she just happened to arrive in Gold Castle at a time that suited *Crow*'s movements.

Regardless, Corbin began gathering information on Ariel through *Crow*.

Revenge had to be calculated and discreet.

If word got out, Corbin's reputation would plummet.

Even Corbin knew that seeking revenge for losing a duel wasn't honorable.

Corbin found out where Ariel was staying and identified the people traveling with her.

Based on that information, he devised a plan to kidnap the wolf and the fairy accompanying Ariel.

By kidnapping them, he could lure Ariel in and deal with the situation quietly.

"Hmph, that elf girl should be on her way here by now, right?"

The wolf and fairy had already been kidnapped.

Five *Crow* members had been killed by the wolf in the process, but Corbin didn't care.

He had paid them, after all. Mercenaries were people who sold their lives for money.

"When she arrives, I'll make her kneel and beg for forgiveness."

Corbin was currently in an abandoned building at the edge of Gold Castle.

There was nothing around, just this lonely building.

Here, even if a commotion broke out, the guards wouldn't come rushing in.

No one would hear.

That's why Corbin had specifically chosen this isolated building.

"If that elf girl resists, subdue her immediately, got it?"

Corbin said to the bearded man standing beside him, the leader of *Crow*.

"That elf girl seems stronger than usual. She defeated me and my *Tanglangquan*, after all."

"Don't worry, young master."

The leader of *Crow* had a relaxed expression.

He had seen Ariel during the information-gathering process.

She was just a small girl.

The giant silver wolf might be a threat, but Ariel was far from intimidating.

A small girl like her would likely break down crying with just a little scare.

'Mobilizing the entire *Crow* for such a kid...'

The leader wore a bitter smile.

Currently, about fifty members of *Crow* were hiding in this abandoned building.

All this to capture one girl, Ariel.

To the leader, it seemed like an incredibly inefficient situation.

'Just one or two men would be enough to capture a kid like her...'

But Corbin had insisted on preparing for any possible situation, and

in the end, the leader had to mobilize the entire group.

At least they were being paid well, otherwise, the leader would never have agreed to this.

‘It’s the wolf we should really be worried about.’

The leader glanced at the giant silver wolf tied up in the corner of the building.

Five of his men had been killed trying to subdue the wolf. Even more had been injured.

From the leader’s perspective, it was a painful loss.

‘But I get to keep the fairy, so I just have to endure a little longer...’

The leader’s gaze shifted to a magical cage placed in another corner.

Inside was a tiny creature.

A fairy.

The fairy was one of Ariel’s companions, but since Corbin was only interested in Ariel, the fairy was left to the leader to deal with as he pleased once the job was done.

‘Heh heh.’

A greedy smile spread across the leader’s face.

Fairies fetched a high price.

Including the payment from this job, he stood to make a considerable fortune.

“You should stop what you’re doing, you know.”

The fairy spoke from inside the magical cage.

“You really shouldn’t make my sister angry. I’m saying this for your own good.”

Of course, no one reacted to the fairy's words.

Corbin snickered, and the leader ignored her.

Fairies were a species known for their love of trickery.

There was no need to believe a word they said.

Chapter 53 : Gold Castle (9)

“If you want to reclaim the wolf and fairy, come to the location written below.”

Ariel carefully examined the paper, but she couldn't discern what the “location written below” was.

It was because she had no knowledge of the geography of Goldcastle.

Should she ask a passing coachman again, like when she went to the banquet hall?

As she was pondering this, lakia, standing beside her, cast a spell.

It was a location tracking spell using ghost blood.

“This way, Ariel! Just follow me!”

Lakia started running, and Ariel followed her.

Although the place where the ghost and Lu were was quite far, it didn't take long to reach it once Lakia and Ariel decided to run.

After a while, Lakia stopped running and pointed to a dilapidated building in front of them.

“Here it is. The ghost is inside.”

“...”

Ariel stared blankly at the abandoned building.

Though it was a large building with about four stories, it looked old and eerie, as if it had been neglected for a long time.

It was a place that didn't match the luxurious and dazzling

atmosphere of Goldcastle at all.

Moreover, there was nothing around.

In such a place, even if a crime occurred, no one would know.

Ariel stepped inside the abandoned building.

Lakia followed closely next to her.

“There are quite a few humans in this building right now. According to my detection spell, there seem to be about fifty.”

Ariel silently nodded at Lakia’s words.

With fifty people, it was likely a group rather than an individual.

Though she didn’t know why they had kidnapped the ghost and Lu, she was determined to save them no matter what.

As they entered the abandoned building, a vast space unfolded before them.

Ariel and Lakia walked towards the center of the vast space, and suddenly, they heard laughter ahead.

“Heh, heh, you really came!”

And someone was approaching them.

A boy walking on crutches.

It was Corbin.

“Long time no see. Your name is Ariel, right? Heh heh. You probably didn’t expect to see my face again here.”

Corbin smirked wickedly as he spoke, but Ariel didn’t react.

Ariel didn’t know who Corbin was, and she didn’t care.

She was simply scanning the surroundings, looking for the ghost and Lu.

Fortunately, she found them quickly.

In the corner of the building, the ghost was chained up, and Lu was trapped in a magical cage.

Ariel started walking towards them.

But Corbin swung his crutches, blocking her path.

“Whoa, not yet! There’s an order to things. If you want to reclaim the wolf and fairy, you have to listen to me first. If you don’t...”

At Corbin’s gesture, the sound of a sword being drawn came from where the ghost and Lu were.

Shing!

Only then did Ariel notice the man with a bushy beard standing next to them.

It was the leader of the Crow Mercenary Corps.

The leader had positioned his sharp sword against the ghost’s side.

“Ariel, the moment you take a single step, that wolf will be sent to the afterlife. Got it? You’ll never see him again. Heh heh.”

Ariel stood still, quietly gazing at Corbin.

Corbin, seemingly pleased, grinned and spoke.

“Yes, that’s it! Isn’t it nice when you behave? Now, first, apologize for the insult you showed me before. How sincerely you apologize will determine whether I let the wolf live or not. If you want to save the wolf, you should get on your knees. Ahaha!”

Corbin leaned his head back and burst into loud laughter.

He had spent countless hours in bed, imagining this very moment!

The thought that he could finally make Ariel bow before him excited Corbin beyond control.

“Come on! Kneel right now and say, ‘I sincerely apologize for that time,’ in a polite manner! No, that won’t do! Lick my shoes! Crawl between my legs like a dog! Then I’ll let your friends live! Understand? Do it now!”

As Corbin ranted like a madman, Lakia quietly asked Ariel beside her.

“Ariel, may I use magic?”

Ariel hesitated for a moment.

She preferred to resolve things peacefully, but with the ghost’s life being threatened, there was no other choice.

“Do as you wish.”

Ariel’s low voice gave her permission, and Lakia’s lips curved into a broad smile.

“Thank you, Ariel.”

Lakia’s voice brimmed with excitement, leaving Corbin dumbfounded.

“Magic...? Don’t you understand the situation? Fine, Ariel, if that’s what you want, I’ll just kill that wol—”

Thud!

Ariel’s fist slammed into Corbin’s face.

When Ariel and Lakia first entered the abandoned building, the leader of the Crow Mercenary Corps had been thrilled.

The reason was Lakia.

Among Ariel’s companions was a little girl with blonde hair wearing a dress, and the leader assumed she was a young lady from some lower noble family.

Her beauty was remarkable, and if sold as a slave, she would fetch a price higher than even the fairy. But to be honest, he hadn’t expected

much.

He hadn't thought Ariel would follow Corbin here to this place—the most remote abandoned building in Goldcastle.

But since they had followed, Lakia's fate was sealed.

The leader knew many depraved nobles who liked girls like Lakia.

If he sold her to them, he'd earn a fortune.

When Corbin gestured, the leader drew his sword and placed it against the wolf's side.

The wolf, injured and exhausted, merely flinched, unable to resist.

The moment Corbin gave the order, the leader intended to thrust the sword into the wolf's body, though that would likely not happen.

Ariel had come all this way to save the wolf. With the wolf captured, she would surely follow Corbin's instructions.

While Corbin was busy with Ariel, the leader would order his men to abduct Rakia. Then it would be over.

Everything was perfect.

But things did not go as planned.

Ariel suddenly slammed her fist into Corbin's face, sending him flying, crutches and all, into the wall.

“...?”

For a moment, the leader didn't know how to react.

Should he kill the wolf?

But Corbin seemed to be unconscious. Judging by the crumbling wall Corbin had crashed into, he might even be dead.

At this point, threatening the wolf's life held no meaning.

“Capture them! The elf and the blonde girl!”

The leader shouted to the subordinates hiding throughout the building.

Corbin was finished. With things turning out like this, the reward Corbin had promised was as good as lost.

But if he captured Ariel, Lakia, and the fairy, and sold them off, it wouldn't be a loss.

In fact, it could be more profitable than Corbin's promised reward.

“Get them!”

“Catch them!”

The subordinates hidden throughout the building rushed toward Ariel and Lakia.

There were fifty of them in total.

The Crow Mercenary Corps had been kidnapping and killing like it was second nature. Catching two little girls should have been as easy as pie for them.

However...

Boom!

Suddenly, an explosion erupted under the feet of the advancing subordinates.

Around ten men were caught in the explosion and blown away, followed by a bolt of blue lightning striking from the sky.

Crash!

Another ten men collapsed, their bodies trembling violently.

“...?!”

The leader couldn't comprehend what was happening.

Explosions and lightning.

Now, even pillars of fire were shooting up, making it impossible to grasp the situation.

“Is... is this magic...?”

Though the leader had only led a mercenary corps in the backstreets of Goldcastle, he had seen magic a few times in his life.

But he had never witnessed magic of this magnitude.

The most he'd seen was a fireball flying through the air. He had never seen magic capable of such large-scale destruction.

“I... I have to run...”

The leader tried to turn around on trembling legs.

He didn't know exactly what was happening, but it was clear that staying here was dangerous.

There was no way he could withstand such powerful magic. All his men would die, and soon, so would he.

Thud. Thud.

Just then, he saw someone walking toward him through the dust.

The silver-haired elf.

It was Ariel.

“D-Don't come any closer... If you do, I'll kill this wolf!”

The leader once again placed his sword against the silver wolf's side.

It was an instinctual action.

Before, he had threatened the wolf to give Corbin control over Ariel. But now, that wasn't the case.

The leader was now threatening the wolf's life to save his own.

“L-Let me go! Then the wolf will be safe!”

The leader shouted desperately, but Ariel didn’t stop walking.

She was approaching slowly, her cold eyes locked on his.

Eyes devoid of emotion.

“Eek!”

The leader, gripped by fear, quickly lost his sanity.

“I said don’t come any closer!!”

The leader swung his sword down toward the wolf.

Though he knew killing the wolf wouldn’t save him, he had lost his reason and wasn’t thinking that far.

Just as the leader’s sword was about to strike the wolf’s neck—

Thwang!

A blue barrier appeared in the air, deflecting the leader’s sword.

The leader flinched and stepped back, and when he looked up again, Ariel was standing before him.

“S-Save me...”

The leader pleaded desperately, forgetting that he had just tried to kill the wolf.

“S-Save me, and I’ll do anything! I’ll give you lots of money if you want, just please...!”

Moonlight streamed in through the broken window, illuminating Ariel’s face.

Her eyes, reflecting the moonlight, glowed a deeper red than usual.

Ariel silently raised a finger and slashed the air.

Swish!

A streak of blue light shot forward, piercing the leader's forehead.

Chapter 54 : Gold Castle (10)

Ariel, having dealt with the leader of the Crow Mercenaries, released the chains binding Ghost and freed Lu from the magical cage.

Ghost had a wound on his side, but when Lu sprinkled healing powder, he quickly recovered completely.

“Ah, as expected, I believed in you, Sister! I knew you’d come to save us!”

Lu clung to Ariel’s face, rubbing his body against her, and Ghost, too, began licking Ariel’s cheek as if to express his gratitude.

Ariel quietly petted Ghost and Lu with her hand.

She had been quite startled earlier when she saw the bloodstained courtyard at the inn, but it was a relief they were safe.

“Um, Ariel...”

From behind, Lakia’s voice was heard.

“I’ve taken care of the humans over there.”

Saying this, Lakia suddenly thrust her head forward.

Watching Lakia’s head for a moment, Ariel soon realized what Lakia was after.

Lakia, too, wanted to be praised.

Ariel extended her hand and gently patted Lakia’s head.

“Hee-hee!”

Lakia let out a delighted laugh, shrinking her body in pleasure.

“... By the way, what were these people trying to do?”

Lu flapped his wings and asked.

Around them lay numerous fallen humans.

They were all members of the Crow Mercenaries, and none survived, not even the leader.

The leader had been killed by Ariel's magic missile, which pierced his forehead, and the rest were annihilated by Lakia's magic.

The most notorious group in Gold Castle had vanished in an instant.

“They kidnapped Ghost and me to lure you here, Sister... Oh, come to think of it, a human boy seemed to be the ringleader.”

At Lu's words, Ariel turned her gaze to where Corbin had been flung earlier.

The wall Corbin had crashed into had collapsed, and the rubble piled high, but Corbin was nowhere to be seen.

He was probably buried under the debris.

“Hmph, whatever they were planning doesn't matter. These lowly creatures were rude to you, Ariel, and they even messed with my friends, so it's only right they die.”

Lakia said, folding her arms.

“I'd like to turn this whole city to ashes, but you wouldn't like that, Ariel, so I'm holding back.”

Lakia spoke as if throwing a tantrum.

There is indeed a historical case where a dragon reduced an entire human kingdom to ashes in a single day.

Even though Lakia wasn't fully grown, she was more than capable of turning a city to ash.

Anyway, since they had rescued Ghost and Lu, it was time to head

back to the inn.

Ariel, Lu, and Ghost left the abandoned building first, and after gathering the bodies of the Crow Mercenaries with magic and burning them, Lakia completely demolished the building.

It was an act of erasing evidence.

No matter how remote the location, if dozens of bodies were left, the city guard would launch an investigation.

If they didn't cover it up, it could lead to unnecessary trouble.

Rumble!

With the sound of the collapsing building in the background, Lakia trotted back, smiling brightly at Ariel.

“Let's bathe together when we get back, Ariel! I'll wash you clean!”

After Ariel's group had left, a figure rose from beside the collapsed building.

It was a man of imposing stature with a spear strapped to his back—Marcus, Corbin's bodyguard.

Without a word, Marcus stared in the direction Ariel had gone.

Fear filled his eyes, and his hands trembled slightly.

He had witnessed the massacre of the Crow Mercenaries by Ariel and Lakia.

The most infamous group in Gold Castle had been obliterated, leaving not even a corpse.

It had taken less than ten minutes.

In just ten minutes, a mercenary group of over fifty had vanished from the continent.

This all started with Corbin.

After losing a duel to Ariel, Corbin had harbored a grudge and sought revenge.

He even kept it a secret from Marcus, probably because he knew Marcus wouldn't approve.

And he was right.

Marcus found the whole affair dishonorable and underhanded.

To seek revenge just because he lost a duel, and to hire such a vile group of mercenaries for a kidnapping scheme—Marcus could never agree to it.

Of course, Marcus knew about the plan, despite Corbin's secrecy.

As Corbin's bodyguard, Marcus was always with him, so there was no way he could be unaware.

However, Marcus had chosen not to interfere, feeling no need to stop him.

Marcus's duty was simply to guard Corbin, not to correct his behavior.

There were times he'd given Corbin advice, but Corbin never listened.

Even when Marcus told him that his martial art, Tanglang Quan, was useless in real combat and urged him to train in swordsmanship instead, Corbin stubbornly focused only on honing those bizarre moves.

That's why he'd been so soundly defeated by Ariel in the duel.

But now, it seemed even that wasn't the real issue.

Even if Corbin had diligently trained in swordsmanship, he wouldn't have been able to defeat Ariel.

Before Ariel and Lokia arrived, Marcus had been hiding near the abandoned building.

He had concealed his presence so thoroughly that neither Corbin nor the Crow Mercenaries noticed him nearby.

Eventually, Ariel and Lakia appeared, and Corbin threatened Ghost's life to try and force an apology from Ariel.

"Hah! Kneel down right now and apologize for that time, saying you're really sorry! Actually, that's not enough! Lick my shoes! Crawl between my legs like a dog! Then I'll spare your friends! Got it? Do it now!"

Corbin shouted like a petty villain, but Ariel just looked at him with a blank expression.

Moments later, Ariel moved.

Thunk!

She buried her fist into Corbin's face.

Marcus couldn't even react in time. Ariel's movements had been so fast.

Before he knew it, her fist had connected with Corbin's face, and Corbin had flown into the wall.

Marcus watched the situation unfold in disbelief.

What happened next was pure horror.

When the Crow Mercenaries, who had been hiding around the building, rushed out, Lakia unleashed high-level magic on them.

It was a one-sided massacre.

Explosions, lightning strikes, pillars of fire—the scene was nothing short of hell.

Marcus stood frozen, unable to move.

Even if he had intervened, there was no way he could've stood against Lakia.

So, he decided to continue watching the situation.

As Lakia wiped out the entire mercenary group and Ariel killed their leader with a flick of her fingers, Marcus made a decision.

He wouldn't interfere. If he did, he would surely die as well.

After a while, Ariel took Ghost and Lu and left the building.

Lakia gathered the bodies of the Crow Mercenaries, burned them, and finally collapsed the building with more high-level magic.

It was powerful magic that even an archmage of the Empire would struggle to cast, yet Lakia showed no signs of fatigue.

After casting such devastating spells, she simply skipped over to Ariel with a bright smile.

Now that Ariel's group had left, Marcus still couldn't believe what had happened.

Both Ariel and Lakia seemed like monsters to him.

He wondered if anyone in the Empire could stand up to them.

Could Sir William, the Sword Saint, or Grand Mage Lygard defeat them?

Or maybe the hero who recently drew Excalibur?

Marcus wasn't sure.

What he was certain of was that Ariel and Lakia were immensely strong and dangerous.

Perhaps even more dangerous than demons.

"Hmph..."

Marcus sighed and began walking.

For now, there was only one thing Marcus had to do.

He needed to check whether Corbin was alive.

Lakia hadn't touched Corbin when she burned the bodies of the Crow Mercenaries.

Corbin was probably buried under the rubble of the collapsed wall.

Or maybe Lakia had noticed but simply didn't care.

To beings like Ariel and Lakia, someone like Corbin was of no concern.

Marcus began to clear away the debris covering Corbin.

Corbin might already be dead.

After being hit by Ariel's fist and buried under the rubble, a fragile boy like Corbin could easily die from that alone.

Even so, Marcus didn't really care.

This was something Corbin had brought upon himself.

The same went for the Crow Mercenaries.

They were a ruthless group that committed kidnappings and murders, so there was no sympathy to be had for their demise.

In fact, with them gone, Gold Castle would be a much better place.

As Marcus cleared the rubble, Corbin's body came into view.

His face was caved in from Ariel's punch.

However, he was still faintly breathing, so it seemed he wasn't dead yet.

Compared to the Crow Mercenaries, who didn't even leave behind corpses, Corbin was rather lucky.

Marcus took out a potion from his pouch and poured it over Corbin's wounds, even making him drink a few bottles.

The potions were incredibly expensive, but since the Baraton family provided them, there was no need to be frugal.

Thanks to the potions, Corbin's condition improved.

His breathing stabilized, and his caved-in face began to look a little more normal, though not completely.

His face wouldn't fully recover, even with treatment back at the family estate.

The damage was too severe.

Still, it was fortunate that his life had been saved.

Besides, Corbin hadn't been particularly handsome to begin with, so a slightly caved-in face wouldn't make much difference.

"Huh, huh...!"

At last, Corbin exhaled and opened his eyes.

Marcus quietly looked down at him and asked,

"Young master, are you conscious?"

Corbin blinked a few times, looking up at Marcus, and then cautiously opened his mouth.

"Mister, who are you?"

Chapter 55 : Gold Castle (11)

The atmosphere in Gold Castle had been somewhat chaotic lately.

There was no shortage of topics for conversation.

The first topic, of course, was the birth of a hero.

The hero turned out to be a young vagrant boy who had been wandering the streets of Gold Castle, but he proved his hero's abilities by skillfully dealing with a monster that appeared at a banquet full of high-ranking nobles.

Afterward, the hero headed for the imperial capital, and rumors began to circulate that he would soon prepare for the upcoming war against the demons.

Of course, nothing had been officially announced. It was merely a rumor, but it was enough to fuel countless conversations.

Whether it was a tavern where commoners gathered or a social party attended by noblewomen, talk of the hero and the demons was unending.

The second topic of conversation was the disappearance of the most infamous mercenary group in Gold Castle, the Crow Mercenaries.

The Crow Mercenaries, a group of about fifty, were known for their vicious activities, including drug trafficking, kidnapping, and murder. Yet one day, they vanished without a trace.

Fifty people had disappeared overnight.

There were various rumors regarding the reason for their disappearance.

Some said they had failed to kidnap a high-ranking noble and fled to

another city, while others claimed that a god, enraged by the Crow Mercenaries' evil deeds, had finally delivered divine justice. These unconfirmed rumors spread like wildfire among the people.

Though nothing had been verified, the disappearance of the Crow Mercenaries certainly brought relief to the citizens of Gold Castle.

There was no longer any need to fear them.

The third and final topic of interest was Corbin, the second son of the Barton family.

Corbin, a troublesome young noble known for picking fights and playing mischievous pranks on citizens, had recently been in an accident that left him unable to move properly, and it was even said that he had lost his memory.

He was in such a dire state that he couldn't even go to the bathroom without the help of a servant pushing his wheelchair, and he couldn't recognize the faces of his parents or siblings.

"Apparently, he's been muttering strange things too?"

"Yeah, that's right. Something like, 'Beware of elves,' he keeps repeating that."

"He's completely lost it. What kind of accident could have left him in such a state?"

Though people talked about Corbin, they didn't feel sympathy or pity for him.

That was because the things Corbin had done while relying on the power of his family had been far too malicious.

To the citizens, the disappearance of the Crow Mercenaries and Corbin's condition were both welcome news.

Though the hero selection ceremony had ended several days ago, Ariel and her companions were still staying in Gold Castle.

They didn't have a set destination yet, and above all, Ariel had

become completely captivated by the desserts of Gold Castle.

Every morning, Ariel would leave the inn and visit various pastry shops in Gold Castle, buying and sampling different desserts.

Gold Castle was indeed a wealthy city, and the quality of its desserts was remarkably high.

Some desserts were so heavenly that it wasn't an exaggeration to say they perfectly suited Ariel's tastes.

Although she could have enjoyed eating the same dessert every day, Ariel found even more joy in visiting different pastry shops and tasting new desserts.

It was both a game and a form of healing for her.

"I... I can't do this anymore..."

Lakia, who had initially followed Ariel around eagerly, had now grown so sick of sweets that just the sight of desserts made her grimace.

As a result, Lakia stopped accompanying Ariel and instead roamed nearby restaurants with Ghost and Lu, devouring meat and drinking alcohol.

Both Ghost and Lakia had enormous appetites for meat, and Lu was a drinker.

No matter how much the three ate and drank, there was never a shortage of money, as Ariel generously supplied them with gold coins.

Therefore, Ghost, Lakia, and Lu had soon become VIPs at the local restaurants.

Although they now traveled separately from Ariel, they always gathered together at night to sleep in the courtyard of the inn.

Sometimes, they would go out of the city on Ghost's back, running through the vast forest for a leisurely stroll.

Though they weren't on an adventure, there was no dissatisfaction with this way of living until they chose a new destination.

It was a peaceful and happy routine.

Today, as usual, Ariel gave Lakia a handful of gold coins before leaving the inn alone and strolling down the street.

In her hand was a map she had bought from a shop a few days ago.

It was a map of Gold Castle's shops, and Ariel had marked all the pastry shops on it.

Her current goal was to visit every pastry shop in Gold Castle.

To others, it might have seemed like a trivial objective, but Ariel took it quite seriously.

Today's destination was a pastry shop located a little away from the city center.

Its name was "The White Rabbit," but from the name alone, it was hard to guess what kind of desserts it specialized in.

Following the map, Ariel made her way to "The White Rabbit" and soon arrived at the shop.

The shop was smaller than she expected and looked somewhat old, but Ariel wasn't disappointed.

In her experience, such places often turned out to be hidden gems.

With determination, Ariel opened the door to "The White Rabbit."

Ding.

The shop was filled with a warm and sweet aroma.

Inside, an old woman with white hair was struggling to carry a large box.

Aside from the old woman, the shop was empty.

Ariel approached the old woman.

She took the box from her and carried it instead.

Though the box was quite heavy, it felt as light as a feather to Ariel.

The old woman looked at Ariel in surprise, her eyes wide.

Her cloudy gaze fell on Ariel's pointed ears.

"An elf...? It's the first time an elf has visited our shop..."

A faint smile spread across the old woman's face.

"Thank you, dear. Could you carry that box to the storage room over there?"

Ariel nodded and carried the box to the storage room.

A quick glance revealed that the box contained a white powder.

Judging by the sweet smell, it was probably sugar.

The box was full of sugar.

After moving the box, Ariel returned to the shop and began examining the displayed desserts.

Though the variety was smaller compared to other pastry shops she had visited, everything looked delicious.

As Ariel carefully scrutinized the desserts, her gaze suddenly fell on a large object at the end of the display.

Startled, she realized it was a rabbit as large as a person, but upon closer inspection, she saw it wasn't alive.

It was a doll.

"That rabbit is the mascot of our shop. I made that costume myself."

The old woman smiled as she approached.

“Sometimes, vagrant children wear that costume and help advertise our shop. They look quite cute in it. I give them desserts as payment... but lately, ever since the hero selection ceremony, all the vagrant children have been driven away. They say it’s to maintain the city’s image...”

A hint of sadness appeared on the old woman’s face.

“I wonder if they’re all doing well... Especially Sion, that boy was unforgettable. He loved his little sister dearly. He used to wear that costume all day just to get desserts for her. He hasn’t come by in days, so I guess he was driven out as well. Well, he’s a tough one, so I’m sure he’ll do fine wherever he is... but it’s still a bit lonely not seeing him.”

At the old woman’s words, Ariel thought of Sion, the boy who had become a hero.

Sion had also been a vagrant and had adored his little sister.

The Sion the old woman spoke of was likely the same one.

Ariel gently petted the rabbit costume.

Its soft fur felt pleasant to the touch.

Of course, it couldn’t compare to Ghost’s fur, but it was still good enough.

“Do you want it?”

The old woman’s question made Ariel turn her gaze back to her.

The old woman had a kind smile on her face.

“If you want it, you can have it. Our shop doesn’t need advertising anymore, and that costume was just an excuse to give the vagrant kids something to do. Now that they’re all gone... take it. It’s my way of thanking you for carrying that box.”

Ariel nodded.

With such soft fur, there was no reason to refuse.

She thought it would be perfect to bring it back to the inn, dress Lakia in it, and cuddle her to sleep.

Ariel was about to store the rabbit costume in her inventory but felt a sudden urge to try it on first.

She slipped the headpiece over her head, zipped up the body, and completely transformed into a rabbit.

“Just as I thought, it suits you well.”

The old woman laughed in satisfaction, while Ariel moved her body around to test the costume.

It was slightly large on her, but it was incredibly cozy and gave her an odd sense of security.

Ariel was about to take the costume off when the door suddenly opened with a ding, and a customer entered the shop.

Ariel turned her gaze toward them.

It was a young boy in a wheelchair, pushed by a middle-aged woman.

The boy had a bowl-shaped haircut and wore expensive-looking clothes, while the middle-aged woman, dressed like a servant, was pushing the wheelchair.

Ariel stared at the boy in the wheelchair.

His slightly sunken face seemed familiar, though she couldn't quite place him.

The boy mumbled softly.

“Beware of elves...”

“Oh dear, young master, there's no elf here. Now, hurry and choose a dessert. You said you wanted something sweet, didn't you?”

The servant scolded him, but the boy

only repeated the same words once more.

“Beware of elves.”

Chapter 56 : Gold Castle (12)

Ariel began selecting her desserts.

Next to her, the boy in the wheelchair kept mumbling, “Beware of elves,” but it didn’t seem to hold any real meaning.

It appeared to be something he said unconsciously, without intent.

“Beware of elves.”

Ariel ignored the boy’s words and continued choosing her desserts.

She picked a fluffy-looking strawberry cake and a bread topped with a generous amount of chocolate syrup—luckily, there was just one of each left.

“Oh, those two are the most popular desserts in our shop. You have quite the eye.”

Hearing the old woman’s comment, Ariel straightened her back slightly and wore a proud expression.

Of course, after visiting so many pastry shops in Gold Castle, it would be absurd if she hadn’t developed a knack for picking the best desserts.

“I’ll give them to you for free, as a thank you for helping with the sugar box earlier and because the bunny costume suits you so well.”

The old woman placed the desserts Ariel had chosen into a paper bag and handed them over.

“Enjoy, and if you like them, come back again.”

Ariel hesitated for a moment.

She had already received the lovely bunny costume, and now she was being offered desserts for free.

Should she really accept this?

“Go ahead, it’s fine. Take them.”

In the end, the old woman directly placed the paper bag in Ariel’s arms.

“...Thank you.”

Ariel bowed her head in gratitude before taking off the bunny costume and storing it in her inventory.

No matter how soft and comfortable the costume was, she couldn’t return to the inn wearing it—it would attract too much attention.

“...Hmm? Young master? What’s wrong?”

At that moment, a voice came from beside her.

Turning her gaze, Ariel saw the boy in the wheelchair staring at her face with wide, horrified eyes.

“U-uh, uh...”

The boy let out a strange scream and began trembling.

“Oh no, young master! Are you alright?”

The servant pushing the wheelchair was alarmed and quickly checked on the boy’s condition.

“Ugh, ugh... ugh!”

The boy’s condition worsened.

He convulsed, fell out of the wheelchair, and started foaming at the mouth, flailing his arms and legs.

Despite all this, his gaze remained fixed on Ariel’s face, and Ariel quietly met his gaze.

The boy's face gradually twisted with fear.

"Aaaargh!"

"Young master! Master Corbin! Please, come to your senses!"

The servant shook the boy, but he soon lost consciousness.

Ding!

"What's going on here?"

Hearing the commotion, two armored soldiers entered the pastry shop.

The servant called out in a panicked voice.

"The young master has collapsed! We need to take him back to the estate immediately!"

"Understood!"

The soldiers lifted the boy and hurried out of the shop.

The servant followed, taking the wheelchair with her, leaving only the old woman and Ariel in the store.

"Oh dear, it seems his health isn't good..."

The old woman murmured as she gazed at the door through which the boy had disappeared.

"It's a shame. He's still so young... tsk, tsk."

When Ariel returned to the inn, she gifted the bunny costume to Lakia.

Lakia was delighted at first, but her expression quickly stiffened when she realized that the bunny costume was meant to be worn like an outfit.

For a dragon, it was hard to accept the idea of wearing another animal's costume, especially since it wasn't even a magical

transformation.

‘But it’s a gift from Ariel...’

Lakia forced herself to put on the bunny costume.

Although the costume was a bit large on her, it wasn’t uncomfortable to move in.

As Lakia waddled toward Ariel in the bunny costume, Ariel smiled slightly.

It was perfect.

Now she could snuggle up with Lakia in the bunny costume and sleep, with Ghost on one side and Lakia on the other.

Sleeping between them would bring her great happiness.

“By the way, Sister, have you heard the news?”

Lu flew over to Ariel and perched on her shoulder.

“Lately, all the adventurers have been heading north. It seems a new dungeon has been discovered there. What do you think about checking it out? You may already know this, but dungeons are full of treasure. Even Lakia wants to go.”

Ariel glanced at Lakia.

Although Lakia’s eyes were sparkling with excitement, Ariel couldn’t see them due to the bunny costume.

Lakia jumped up and shouted.

“I really want to go! To the dungeon!”

Dragons love treasure. Collecting various treasures in their lairs is one of a dragon’s hobbies.

“Usually, dungeons are dangerous places, but with you and Lakia, it shouldn’t be much of a problem. How about we just go to get some fresh air?”

At Lu's suggestion, Ariel nodded.

"Alright."

There was no reason to refuse. In fact, it was only natural to go.

Ariel's goal was adventure, and an adventure without a dungeon didn't make sense.

It was decided that they would head for the dungeon the next evening.

There was no need to rush, as they had planned to travel on Lakia's back, and Ariel also had a place she wanted to visit.

Early the next morning, Ariel left the inn and made her way to the "White Rabbit" pastry shop she had visited the day before.

The strawberry cake and chocolate syrup bread she had bought the previous day had been so delicious that she wanted to buy them again.

Moreover, she felt the urge to repay the old woman.

Thanks to the bunny costume the old woman had given her, Ariel had slept soundly and woke up feeling refreshed.

Ding.

As Ariel entered "The White Rabbit," the old woman greeted her with a smile.

"Oh, you're back. Did you enjoy the desserts yesterday?"

"Yes."

Ariel quickly walked over to the display case.

The day before, there had only been one strawberry cake and one chocolate syrup bread, but today, there were plenty.

Ariel decided to buy two of each and pulled a handful of gold coins from her inventory to hand to the old woman.

“My goodness, there’s no need to pay that much!”

The old woman was startled and returned the gold coins to Ariel.

“One gold coin is more than enough to buy all of this.”

The old woman even gave Ariel change in silver coins, and Ariel silently stored the money back in her inventory.

“Wait a moment.”

While the old woman packed the desserts into a paper bag, just as she had the day before, Ariel thought seriously about how she could repay her.

Giving her a large sum of gold would be easy—Ariel had plenty of it.

But that felt lacking in sincerity, and besides, the old woman didn’t seem like someone who cared much about money.

If she had, she wouldn’t have gone out of her way to give vagrant children odd jobs, nor would she have given Ariel the desserts for free the day before.

Ariel asked if the old woman had anything she needed help moving today.

The old woman smiled softly.

“Thank you, but there’s nothing to move today. Helping with the sugar box yesterday was more than enough.”

As Ariel stood quietly, the old woman approached and gently patted her cheek.

“You’re a kind child. Well, if you insist, there is one favor I could ask...”

Ariel’s eyes widened at the mention of a favor.

She didn’t know what it could be, but she wanted to help in any way she could.

After leaving the pastry shop, Ariel headed for the place the old woman had mentioned.

It was a mansion near Gold Castle's square.

It had originally been the old woman's home, but now her son lived there with the woman he had recently married.

The favor was to discreetly check whether her son was doing well.

"My son doesn't like it when I visit... I suppose it makes him uncomfortable."

The old woman's son had once been very filial, but after meeting a certain woman and getting married, his personality had changed.

He disliked it when his mother visited the house and became irritable whenever she asked about his wife.

Because of this, the old woman didn't even know who her son had married, and that worried her.

"Could you just take a quick look from outside and let me know if they seem to be doing alright?"

Ariel had agreed to fulfill the old woman's request.

It wasn't a difficult favor.

If such a small task could ease the old woman's worries, Ariel was happy to help.

When she arrived at the mansion, Ariel scanned her surroundings.

After confirming no one was around, she leaped onto the roof of the mansion.

With barely a sound, Ariel walked across the roof until she found an open window.

She was about to peek inside when a voice came from her chest.

"Sister... where are we?"

Ariel flinched and looked down.

Lu had poked his head out of her chest, looking up at her.

Apparently, Lu had been napping inside Ariel's clothes and had ended up coming along with her.

“Hmm, but I feel something strange around here. My body feels tingly.”

As Lu mumbled to himself, footsteps could be heard from inside the mansion.

Step. Step.

Ariel quickly pushed Lu back into her clothes and quietly observed the inside of the mansion through the window.

Inside, a man was staggering around.

Chapter 57 : Gold Castle (13)

Ariel closely observed the man through the window.

His eyes were sunken, and his cheeks were hollow, giving him a sickly appearance. He bore a resemblance to the old woman from the pastry shop.

This man must be her son.

He shuffled around the room with a hunched posture, dragging his feet like a zombie.

Whether he was exhausted or unwell was unclear, but he definitely didn't look healthy.

The man collapsed onto the bed as if he couldn't hold himself up anymore, and shortly after, a woman entered the room.

“?”

Ariel tilted her head in confusion.

The woman who entered looked strange.

She had horns on her head, bat-like wings on her back, and a tail with a pointed, arrow-shaped tip.

“Sister... it seems like that woman might be a demon...” Lu whispered quietly from within Ariel's cloak, and Ariel gave a small nod.

She had never seen a demon before, but it was clear that this woman wasn't human.

Judging by her appearance, she was likely a demon.

The woman slithered onto the bed with a snake-like motion and began gently caressing the man's body.

The man stared blankly at the ceiling, letting out soft sounds like "Ugh" and "Heek" each time the woman's hand brushed his skin.

Eventually, the woman undressed the man and climbed on top of him.

And then...

"No, Sister...!"

Lu quickly covered Ariel's eyes.

"You're too young to see this...!"

Though Lu acknowledged Ariel's strength, he still thought of her as a young elf.

Given what was happening in the room, Lu believed Ariel was too young to understand.

"You shouldn't watch. This is bad, Sister...!"

However, Ariel already knew enough and wanted to continue watching the curious scene.

At that moment, a voice came from the front.

"Huh, are you spying on us? How naughty."

Lu immediately let go of Ariel's face, and she looked up.

The woman, likely a demon, had approached the window.

"Why don't you come in instead of sneaking around out there?"

The woman spoke in a sultry voice.

"I'll make you feel good."

Ariel entered the room through the window.

It wasn't because she was tempted by the woman's offer, but rather because she suspected the woman was a demon.

With horns on her head, bat wings on her back, and an arrow-shaped tail, Ariel had a good idea of what this creature was.

A demon with that appearance could only be a succubus.

Succubi were demons that seduced men to drain their life force, and the current situation fit perfectly.

Ariel glanced at the man lying on the bed, the old woman's son.

He lay there like a corpse, staring emptily at the ceiling, as if completely drained of his life force.

"An elf and a fairy, huh? Interesting. I can't devour either of you, but..."

The woman eyed Ariel with a suggestive gaze.

"You're cute, so I'll make a special exception and treat you well."

The woman's eyes glowed pink, and a mist began to spread around them.

It was the charm mist that succubi used to seduce their targets.

Anyone exposed to the mist—regardless of race, gender, or age—would become a slave to the succubus, consumed by lust and incapable of rational thought.

In that sense, succubi were incredibly powerful demons.

Although their numbers were few, and they could only charm a limited number of people at a time, they could easily turn most opponents into their slaves if they wished.

That's why, during past wars with demons, humans would decapitate a succubus on sight.

As soon as soldiers identified a succubus, they wouldn't engage in

conversation, wouldn't make eye contact, and would immediately draw their swords if they saw charm mist spreading around them.

Even so, many human soldiers had fallen victim to succubi.

It wasn't just soldiers—sometimes even high-ranking knights ended up as prey.

Once seduced, it was over. From that point on, the victim would be drained of their life force until death, becoming a living corpse.

Much like the old woman's son now.

“Heh, heh...”

Lu wobbled as he flew toward the succubus, sticking to her body.

His eyes were unfocused, and his mouth hung open—he had already fallen victim to the succubus's charm mist.

“You're so tiny. It's a bit of a problem if you're too small.”

The succubus gently stroked Lu's body.

Lu trembled, letting out soft sounds like the old woman's son had earlier, clearly pleased by the touch.

“And I like this one even more.”

The succubus wagged her arrow-shaped tail as she approached Ariel.

She leaned in close, her breath hot against Ariel's face.

“Ah, I just can't resist elves. Such smooth skin. Let's see what's inside, shall we?”

The succubus exhaled heavily and tried to undress Ariel.

“I wonder what kind of cute little body is hiding under here...”

At that moment, Ariel grabbed the succubus's wrist.

Smack.

“Huh?”

A look of confusion appeared on the succubus’s face.

“The charm... didn’t work?”

When the charm takes hold, the succubus’s victim should never resist, even enjoying being undressed. But Ariel had grabbed her wrist instead.

Flash.

The succubus’s eyes glowed again, much brighter than before, and the mist around them thickened.

“Well, sometimes the charm doesn’t work as well. Either they’re strong in magic, have a powerful mind, or in cases like yours, are pure... which means I just have to try a bit harder.”

The succubus chuckled softly.

“It’s a bit of a hassle, but I like these kinds of people. It’s more fun to break them. If it’s too easy, it’s boring.”

The succubus was now fully convinced that Ariel had fallen under her charm.

If she hadn’t, Ariel would have shown a frightened expression or tried to run away.

But Ariel just stood there, expressionless, not reacting at all.

“Now, show me. You’ll enjoy it too. All the others did...”

The succubus panted and reached out to undress Ariel again.

If it were another succubus, Ariel would have been killed immediately after the charm took effect.

Ariel was still young and, more importantly, a girl.

A succubus couldn’t drain life force from a female victim.

Yet this succubus was enchanted by Ariel.

Seducing men was only a means to drain their energy; she had no personal interest in them.

Her personal interest lay solely in cute girls like Ariel.

The succubus was clearly excited.

Among all the girls she had ever seen, none had been as adorable as Ariel, and the fact that she was an elf made her all the more enticing.

“Ha...”

With trembling hands, the succubus began undoing the buttons on Ariel’s clothes.

“I’m really looking forward to this...”

At that moment, Ariel swung her hand as if swatting away an insect.

Thwack.

But the result was far from light.

The succubus, struck across the face by the back of Ariel’s hand, flew into the wall and stopped moving.

“Aah... Sister...”

The charm mist that had filled the room dissipated, and Lu came to his senses.

By this time, Lu had somehow ended up completely naked.

He had undressed himself while under the succubus’s spell.

“S-Sister? Are you alright?!”

Blushing furiously, Lu quickly dressed himself and hurriedly flew over to Ariel.

Ariel crouched in front of the succubus’s crumpled body, poking it

with her finger.

It didn't move.

The succubus's body was twisted, especially her neck, which had been bent the wrong way.

Ariel hadn't held back in her strike, killing the succubus instantly.

"Hmm, succubi are truly terrifying demons..."

Lu trailed off mid-sentence.

He couldn't help but wonder if the truly terrifying one here was Ariel.

Of course, to Lu, Ariel was a reliable ally, kind and cute.

As long as no one bothered her first, she was the kindest being in the world.

"Wait, Sister, what are you doing? Are you planning to take the demon's corpse with you?"

At Lu's question, Ariel nodded.

She had just stored the succubus's body in her inventory.

Just as monster corpses could be sold for money, Ariel thought that perhaps a demon's body could be valuable too. Someone might need it.

And even if that wasn't the case, leaving a demon's corpse lying around seemed inconsiderate.

"Uh... who are you...?"

A voice came from behind them.

Turning around, Ariel saw the old woman's son looking at her and Lu with a puzzled expression.

Now that the succubus was dead and the charm had worn off, he had regained his senses.

“Who are you, and why are you in my house...”

He tried to get out of bed, but immediately collapsed onto the floor.

Having been drained of his life force by the succubus for so long, his body was too weak.

“Just lie down, human.”

Lu fluttered over and sprinkled some healing powder on him.

While healing powder was typically used to treat wounds, it could also help restore vitality to some extent.

After a while, the old woman’s son managed to stand up.

“Th-thank you. You’ve healed me. But... what happened to my wife... no, the woman who was here?”

“That woman was a succubus, a demon. Our sister took care of her.”

“Aah...”

The old woman’s son nodded.

He didn’t seem too surprised to hear the word “succubus,” as if he had suspected something all along.

“Thank you so much for saving me. You’re still so young, but you’re amazing. Judging by your pointed ears, you’re an elf, right?”

The old woman’s son smiled as he looked at Ariel, but Ariel simply gazed out the window, paying him no attention.

“Hey.”

Lu spoke in a stern voice.

“Put some clothes on, human.”

“Oh...”

The old woman’s son was still completely naked.

Chapter 58 : Gold Castle (14)

About a month ago, the old woman's son encountered a succubus.

"One night, while walking along, a woman suddenly approached me. She had a robe on, so I couldn't tell she was a demon. She said she'd make me feel good and asked me to follow her... I couldn't refuse. I knew something was off, but my body craved her."

The old woman's son followed the succubus, and after that, she drained his energy daily until they even got married.

Lu crossed his arms and said, "It's not really your fault. Once you're ensnared by a succubus, it's impossible to refuse. If it weren't for my sister, you'd be dead by now. You can't survive long while having your energy drained by a succubus. Lasting a month is impressive."

At Lu's words, the old woman's son bowed his head once again to Ariel.

"Thank you so much. You saved my life."

Now, the old woman's son was neatly dressed, which allowed Ariel to look at him with ease.

Ariel took out a dessert from her inventory and handed it to the old woman's son.

"Eat."

At this point, the old woman's son was gaunt, as the succubus had fed him little and drained his energy continuously.

"This... this is..."

Tears welled up in his eyes as he looked at the dessert Ariel handed him.

“It’s my mother’s dessert... isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

The dessert Ariel handed him was something she had bought earlier from the old woman’s bakery.

The old woman’s son began to eat the dessert ravenously.

Though he choked and coughed halfway through, he finished it to the last bite.

“Ugh, ugh, I’ve been such an unfilial son... I married the succubus and even kicked my mother out of the house... I must bring her back immediately...!”

The old woman’s son suddenly stood up and dashed out of the house.

Watching him go, Ariel smiled slightly.

She felt a bit reluctant about giving away the dessert, but she thought it was enough to repay the old woman.

“Sister, let’s head back to the inn,” Lu said, hopping onto Ariel’s shoulder.

“I’m starving.”

When Ariel returned to the inn, there was a dwarf sitting in the room.

The dwarf, with golden hair and beard, looked at Ariel with a stern expression, arms crossed.

“So you’re the elf named Ariel.”

The dwarf stood up and approached Ariel with brisk steps. Though his face looked like an adult’s, his short stature put his eyes at Ariel’s level.

“Hmph, just a young elf, nothing impressive!”

At the dwarf’s remark, Lu, standing nearby, flared up.

“Who are you, and why are you barging into someone else’s room?”

The dwarf turned to look at Lu, his intense gaze somewhat unsettling.

“Fairy, stay out of this. I have business with this elf. Open your mouth again, and I’ll split that little body of yours in two.”

“...?”

Lu was taken aback.

Inside, he wanted to retort, “Who do you think you are, just a dwarf,” but something about the dwarf’s aura felt dangerous. This was no ordinary dwarf.

When Lu fell silent, the dwarf turned his gaze back to Ariel.

“My name is Lionel. I’m Lakia’s older brother.”

Lu’s eyes widened.

If this dwarf was Lakia’s brother, that meant he was actually a dragon.

That meant his threat to split Lu in two wasn’t just a bluff. A dragon could easily kill a fairy with a mere gesture.

Lu quietly slipped into Ariel’s hat to hide.

“Ariel. I heard Lakia has taken you as her master. Is that true?”

Ariel nodded in response to Lionel’s question. While she didn’t really teach Lakia anything, the dragon had been following her around, insisting on becoming her subordinate.

“Hmph, this is absurd! An elf daring to claim to teach a dragon? Such arrogance!”

Lionel was furious.

An elf, serving as a dragon’s teacher, was unheard of. It was an affront to all dragons.

“No one in this world can teach a dragon! This is an insult to our entire race!”

What angered Lionel the most was Ariel’s nonchalant demeanor.

Any other elf would have been cowering at the mention of a dragon, bowing their head or kneeling.

Yet Ariel stood tall, calmly staring back at him.

To make things worse, a faint smile played at the corners of Ariel’s lips.

The audacity of smiling so confidently — how far had the dragons’ dignity fallen?

‘This is all Lakia’s foolishness,’ Lionel thought to himself, but Ariel’s smile had a different meaning. It wasn’t mockery or contempt.

Ariel simply found the dwarf form cute.

Even though his true identity was a dragon, he had the appearance of a dwarf.

His golden beard, short limbs, and chubby hands and feet all struck her as adorable.

She even had the urge to reach out and touch him.

“It seems I have no choice. I’ll show you the true might of a dragon.”

Lionel puffed out his broad chest and declared, “Kneel before me and bow your head now!”

With a thunderous voice, a menacing aura swept through the room.

It was the Dragon Fear.

Lu, hiding in Ariel’s hat, passed out on the spot, and even the ghost outside the yard cowered and whimpered.

But Ariel just stood there, staring at Lionel.

“The Dragon Fear isn’t working...?” Lionel’s expression twisted in confusion.

According to his mother, no species could withstand Dragon Fear.

But this small elf... No, despite being the same height, this young elf stood unaffected by Dragon Fear. Something was definitely wrong.

“So Lakia’s words weren’t completely an exaggeration...”

Lionel hesitated.

He wanted to unleash high-level magic on Ariel, but the thought of an actual battle gave him pause.

Dragon Fear hadn’t worked, and this was someone his sister respected as a teacher.

Even though she was just an elf, the situation made him uneasy.

If a fight broke out and he lost, the disgrace would be unimaginable.

Rumors of a dragon losing to an elf would spread, and other dragons would mock and belittle him.

It would be wise to back down for now.

“That... that was just a joke! I have no intention of fighting you! I’m very busy, and I only came here to fetch Lakia!”

“Lakia?”

Ariel tilted her head as she asked.

“Yes! Our mother urgently wants to see her, so I came to take her! Of course, I don’t want to fight you!”

Ariel glanced toward the yard.

Lakia was there, calming the ghost that had been startled by Lionel’s Dragon Fear.

Ariel walked outside toward Lakia.

“Wh-what are you doing...?”

Lionel stumbled, tripping over a fallen rabbit doll costume. He managed to avoid falling but blushed in embarrassment.

Regardless, Ariel ignored him and walked past, heading for the yard.

“A-Ariel...”

Lakia looked up at Ariel.

Normally, she'd greet Ariel with a smile, but this time, her reaction was rather subdued.

“Did you meet my brother...?”

Lakia had been scolded by Lionel earlier and was feeling down.

She had boldly declared her independence to their mother, intending to create her own lair, but now she was embarrassed to face Lionel after following Ariel around.

“I think I need to go see my mother...”

Lakia said, her voice quivering.

Lionel's visit was because their mother wanted to see Lakia urgently. It was only natural to go when summoned, but Lakia didn't want to leave Ariel's side.

“We were supposed to go to the dungeon together... sob...”

Ariel reached out and patted Lakia's head.

“It's okay, go ahead.”

“Ariel...”

“I'll set aside some treasure for you.”

“R-really...? I love shiny things...”

Ariel chuckled and nodded.

“Of course.”

“Sniff... Ariel...!”

Lakia hugged Ariel tightly.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can! Stay healthy until then!”

“You be careful too.”

And so, Lakia temporarily left Ariel’s side to go see her mother.

“Hmph, I won’t go easy on you next time!”

Lionel shouted as he left.

“Next time, I’ll deal with you properly, elf!”

Chapter 59 : Dungeon (1)

Ariel decided to ride the Ghost to travel to the dungeon.

Originally, she had planned to fly on Lakia, but since Lakia had gone to visit her mother, there was no other option.

While racing through the forest on the Ghost, Ariel stopped by a lakeside.

It was time to eat.

Since leaving Gold Castle, she hadn't taken a break, and she was starting to get hungry.

Ariel sat on a nearby rock and opened her inventory.

Inside the inventory were many items: the corpses of various monsters, the corpse of the succubus she recently defeated, and an assortment of different foods.

She was using it like a cluttered storage room, but she never had to worry about running out of space.

It seemed that the inventory was affected by her stamina stat, and thanks to that, Ariel's inventory space was unlimited.

Ariel took out some meat for the Ghost to eat.

Items inside the inventory maintained their condition, so if she put cooked meat into it, she could take it out later and eat it as freshly cooked.

At first glance, it might not seem like much, but it was incredibly convenient.

Hot food would always remain hot, and cold food would always

remain cold.

Of course, the meat for the Ghost was raw.

The Ghost preferred raw, bloody meat over cooked meat.

Lakia was the same, but since Lakia wasn't here, she only took out raw meat for the Ghost.

After giving the raw meat to the Ghost, Ariel took out some food for Lu.

Lu's portion was potato stew.

It was something she had bought in bulk from a restaurant in Gold Castle, and Lu really liked drinking fruit wine with this potato stew.

When she handed him a steaming bowl of potato stew and a bottle of fruit wine, Lu beamed with a broad smile.

"Thank you, sister!"

After taking care of the Ghost and Lu's meals, Ariel took out her own food.

While Ariel liked desserts, it wasn't as though she ate only desserts all the time.

Sometimes, she craved something spicy and salty, like ramen.

Of course, there was no ramen here.

Ariel took out a stir-fried dish with meat and vegetables. This, too, was something she had bought from a restaurant in Gold Castle, and she liked its spicy flavor.

She began to leisurely eat by the tranquil lakeside.

The clear sky, the floating clouds, and the sun's gentle rays.

The sound of birds chirping and leaves rustling.

Everything was simply peaceful.

“Do you think Lakia made it safely?”

At Lu’s words, Ariel narrowed her eyes and looked off into the distant mountains.

She didn’t know where Lakia’s mother was, but she was sure Lakia would arrive safely.

Lakia was a dragon, after all, so she could reach any part of the continent in no time by flying.

By now, she was probably with her mother.

“Hm, it’s definitely quieter without Lakia,” Lu said as he emptied his fruit wine. It seemed like he was already missing Lakia.

Of course, Ariel also missed Lakia.

Hugging Lakia, who was dressed up in her rabbit doll costume, had been a great joy, but now she was gone.

Rustle.

The sound of leaves being stepped on came from behind.

When she turned her head, something was standing next to the bushes.

A large beast with black fur.

It wasn’t a monster—probably a wolf.

“Grrrr...”

The Ghost crouched low in a wary stance, and the black wolf also crouched low.

As the Ghost and the black wolf stared at each other, Lu muttered, “That black wolf, it seems to be a spirit beast. It’s way too big to be a normal wolf. It’s even bigger than the Ghost. Though it looks younger.”

At Lu’s words, Ariel quietly looked at the black wolf.

It was definitely bigger than the Ghost, but she couldn't tell if it was younger.

To Ariel, it just looked like a wolf.

A huge wolf.

Both the Ghost and the black wolf growled at each other, but neither seemed willing to fight.

So, Ariel didn't feel the need to step in.

There was no need to intervene as long as the black wolf didn't attack the Ghost.

A moment later, the Ghost stood up.

With the raw meat still in its mouth, the Ghost approached the black wolf and dropped the meat in front of it before returning to Ariel's side.

The Ghost had given up its meat to the black wolf.

The black wolf hurriedly began devouring the meat, as if it had been starving.

Ariel smiled softly and stroked the Ghost's chin.

"Well done."

It was admirable to share its food with a fellow creature in need.

Anyway, Ariel had plenty of raw meat in her inventory.

She took out another piece of raw meat for the Ghost, and the Ghost ate its fill without any lack.

After finishing their meal, they set off again toward the dungeon.

Since Ariel felt bad about continuing to ride the Ghost, she decided to walk slowly instead.

There was no rush.

Going to the dungeon was part of the adventure, but it wasn't urgent. She just needed to check it out and gather treasures to give to Lakia. As they walked through the forest, the Ghost occasionally glanced back.

It seemed to be conscious of the black wolf from earlier.

The black wolf was following them at a certain distance but never came too close.

It was exactly like how the Ghost had acted when Ariel first met it.

If that's the case, perhaps the black wolf could become a part of their group as well.

Ariel felt a bit of excitement.

She hadn't touched the black wolf yet, but she had a feeling its fur would be soft and fluffy.

When she had looked at it from a distance earlier, its fur had a glossy shine to it.

As she imagined being nestled between the black wolf and the Ghost, Ariel began to feel drowsy.

She had eaten recently, and now a food coma was setting in.

With her eyes half-closed, Ariel started to stumble, and soon she plopped down on the spot.

Lu, too, was fast asleep, drunk on fruit wine, curled up inside Ariel's hat.

The only one left awake was the Ghost.

The Ghost watched Ariel for a moment before carefully nudging her to lie down on the ground with its snout.

Then it sat beside her, keeping watch.

“...Sister, sister! The Ghost is fighting a monster!”

Ariel awoke groggily to the sound of a panicked voice.

Lu was poking her cheek.

“It looks like a monster attacked while we were sleeping!”

Ariel shot up.

Sure enough, the Ghost was fighting something.

It was a monster that resembled an owl, but it was as large and stocky as a bear.

An Owlbear, a top predator of the forest.

Even though the Ghost was a spirit beast, it stood no chance against an Owlbear.

The Owlbear’s claws were strong enough to split thick trees with a single blow, and its savage nature made it attack anything in its path.

The only reason the Ghost was holding its own against the Owlbear was that the black wolf was helping.

Every time the Owlbear lunged at the Ghost, the black wolf threw itself in the way, and the Ghost, in turn, bit at the Owlbear’s legs and neck in fierce retaliation.

Though the Ghost was unharmed, the black wolf had sustained deep wounds on its side and back.

Even so, the black wolf didn’t hesitate to protect the Ghost.

Ariel extended her hand toward the Owlbear.

Just as she was about to cast Magic Missile, a large fireball shot out from the forest.

“Fire Lance!”

With a young voice, the fireball struck the Owlbear square in the

head.

“Keeaaak!”

The Owlbear let out a shriek and collapsed, only for a bolt of blue lightning to shoot out from the forest next.

“Call Lightning!”

The blue lightning bolt struck the Owlbear’s body directly.

Zzzt!

The Owlbear shuddered and then slumped, unmoving.

It was dead.

Ariel looked toward the forest where the magic had come from.

A girl was walking toward them, holding a large staff, her purple hair tied into twin tails.

She was wearing a wizard’s robe, and having just cast magic, she was clearly a wizard.

“Hi!”

The girl beamed as she greeted Ariel.

“You’re an elf, huh? Are you hurt?”

Ariel nodded.

The girl looked over at the Ghost, the black wolf, and Lu sitting on Ariel’s lap in turn.

“Are the wolf and the fairy your friends?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. You were lucky. The Owlbear is a dangerous monster. If I hadn’t passed by, you would’ve been eaten. So basically, I saved your life.”

The girl gave Ariel a triumphant smile, clearly expecting some kind of gratitude.

Ariel obliged.

“Thank you.”

“Haha, no worries. I didn’t help just to hear that, but yeah, without me, you would’ve been eaten by the Owlbear. You’re really lucky.”

The girl, evidently pleased, tapped the ground with her staff.

“You know, I’m the chief of the magic tower. People call me a genius. So, meeting me is a huge stroke of luck for you.”

Chapter 60 : Dungeon (2)

The girl's name was Sena.

Sena had been learning magic at the Magic Tower since she was young, and due to her exceptional talent, she had already mastered most of the magic at a young age.

“At least when it comes to magical talent, no one in the Magic Tower can match me. Even the Tower Master said so. If I keep training diligently, I'll someday reach the rank of Archmage... But.”

Sena frowned.

“I already know everything, so what more training do I need? I'm sick of training. All I do is practice the same boring spells over and over. I want to use more flashy magic and gain real combat experience.”

A smile spread across Sena's face.

“That's why I secretly slipped out of the Magic Tower. I heard a dungeon was recently discovered nearby. Well, they say it's dangerous, and you shouldn't enter recklessly, but that's for ordinary people. For a genius magician like me, there's no problem. I'll conquer the dungeon. And once my achievements are recognized... Hey, are you listening to me?”

Sena stopped talking and looked at Ariel.

Ariel was crouched in front of a black wolf and a ghost, checking their injuries.

The black wolf had a large wound on its side, and the ghost was limping.

Ariel bit her lip.

This was clearly her fault.

If she had secured safety by deploying a shield before she dozed off, the ghost and the black wolf wouldn't have fought the owlbear.

They had fought the owlbear to protect Ariel while she slept.

Otherwise, they would have easily avoided the fight and wouldn't have gotten hurt.

Ariel gently patted the ghost and the black wolf, feeling guilty.

From now on, she would make sure to put up a shield when she felt drowsy.

Sena approached.

"Hmm, the wolf got hurt. Don't worry. Didn't I tell you? Meeting me is your luck. It's not as effective as a priest's holy magic, but I've learned healing magic. Let me help. Phew, really, if it weren't for me..."

At that moment, Lu spun above the black wolf and the ghost.

Healing dust fell from Lu's body, and the wounds of the black wolf and the ghost healed completely.

"Ah... There was a fairy... Well, that's nice..."

Sena scratched her cheek awkwardly.

Now that the black wolf and the ghost were healed, Ariel stood up.

Her sleep had already been interrupted, so she planned to head back to the dungeon.

At that moment, Sena tapped Ariel's shoulder.

"Hey, what's your name?"

"Ariel."

“Right, Ariel. I already introduced myself earlier, didn’t I?”

“.....”

Ariel stared blankly at Sena.

She hadn’t really been listening to Sena’s story while tending to the ghost and the black wolf’s wounds.

Sena let out a deep sigh.

“I’ll tell you again. My name is Sena, okay? Sena. Remember it. Someday I’ll be an Archmage... No, never mind that. Anyway, Ariel, where are you headed? If we’re going the same way, I’ll accompany you. It seems dangerous for you to wander around alone, so I’m offering to protect you.”

“I’m heading to the dungeon.”

“Really? Are you talking about the newly discovered dungeon nearby? You’re going in there?”

“Yeah.”

Sena’s expression turned serious.

“But dungeons are extremely dangerous. If someone like you goes in, you’ll be... Hmm, am I underestimating you too much? Sorry. I apologize. But why are you going into the dungeon?”

“For adventure.”

“Pfft.”

Sena burst out laughing.

She waved her hand and apologized again.

“Sorry for laughing. But adventure? You really are an elf. I’ve heard elves are a closed-off race, and I guess it’s true. Is this your first time out in the world?”

Ariel quietly watched Sena.

She felt as though she was being belittled.

“Hey, human.”

Lu crossed her arms and glared at Sena.

“Our lady may be out in the world for the first time, but she’s incredibly strong. Even stronger than a dragon. Just yesterday, she was called...”

“Pffft, okay, I get it, stop.”

Sena clutched her stomach, laughing.

“Stronger than a dragon...? Haha, you two are hilarious. I like it. Alright, let’s go together. You’re really lucky, you know. Since you met me, I’ll protect you, so let’s see what kind of adventure we’ll have in the dungeon!”

Lu glanced at Ariel, and Ariel nodded silently.

It meant they’d go together.

There wasn’t really a need for help, but Sena had helped deal with the owlbear earlier.

Though her personality seemed a bit quirky, she didn’t seem to have bad intentions.

Thus, Ariel headed toward the dungeon with Sena.

Sena talked a lot.

As they walked to the dungeon, she chattered nonstop beside Ariel.

“Ariel, you should visit the Magic Tower sometime. Then you’ll see how great of a magician I am. Oh, why don’t you learn magic too? I’ve heard elves are quite talented with mana. Well, not as talented as me, but you could learn quickly. Magic is really useful. Like earlier, when we encountered monsters, you could just deal with them using magic.”

“Our lady is already a magician,” Lu said.

“She just doesn’t need to use it much, but sometimes she deals with monsters using magic.”

“Oh, really? Ariel, you’re a magician? You don’t look like one. Or maybe you do? It’s hard to tell without a staff. Magicians usually carry staves.”

“Hmph, that’s only for humans. My friend Lakia used to cast magic without a staff,” Lu said.

Sena smirked.

“Oh, this Lakia sounds impressive. I’d like to duel her with magic someday.”

“You’d better not...”

Just then, a giant monster blocked their path.

It had the head of a bull and a massive body.

A minotaur.

Ariel smiled.

Minotaurs make excellent ingredients.

She hadn’t bothered to store the owlbear in her inventory, but the minotaur...

“Fire Burst!”

Before Ariel could act, Sena swung her staff and cast a spell.

Boom!

An explosion erupted at the minotaur’s feet.

Though it wasn’t as impressive as Lakia’s magic, it was enough to knock the minotaur down and burn its legs.

“Fire Lance! Call Lightning!”

Sena unleashed a series of spells at the minotaur, eventually finishing it off.

Ariel looked at the minotaur’s corpse with regret.

It was so mangled that it was barely recognizable.

No chance of selling it now.

“How was that? That’s the power of magic.”

Sena wiped the sweat from her forehead and smiled.

“It looks a little gruesome, but that’s reality. If I hadn’t used magic, the minotaur would’ve crushed us instead.”

Sena patted Ariel’s shoulder and walked ahead.

Her back seemed to say, “I’ll lead, just follow me.”

“That girl’s personality is a bit strange, don’t you think?” Lu muttered quietly.

Ariel nodded slightly in agreement and followed Sena.

At any rate, the dungeon wasn’t far now.

They would reach it by evening.

In front of the dungeon, there was a crowd of people.

Most of them were adventurers, with a few merchants here and there.

It was natural for adventurers and merchants to gather when a new dungeon appeared.

The adventurers hunted for treasure, and the merchants bought it at a fair price.

This way, adventurers didn’t have to carry the treasure all the way back to the city, and merchants could resell it for a profit.

But the atmosphere this time was different.

The crowd wasn't lively, and everyone wore grim expressions.

"Damn it... What kind of dungeon is this?"

It was because the difficulty of the dungeon was far beyond expectations.

A group of adventurers who had just entered had come out severely injured, barely escaping the dungeon.

Many had already died, and not even the entrance had been fully explored.

"It's because of that giant... That giant is guarding the next area, not letting anyone through!"

An adventurer screamed with a pale face.

He had just escaped the dungeon.

Having lost his entire party, he was the only survivor, and he still seemed terrified even after escaping.

"We have to give up on this dungeon... No one can defeat that giant..."

His words caused a murmur among the crowd.

He wasn't the first to say this.

Every adventurer who had entered the dungeon said the same thing.

"Should we really give up? But we haven't even gotten any treasure yet..."

No one was willing to enter the dungeon anymore.

The adventurers lingered at the entrance, debating whether or not to give up.

Most agreed that the dungeon was too dangerous.

And just then.

“Ariel, we’re finally here. This must be the new dungeon.”

Ariel’s group had arrived at the dungeon entrance.

Chapter 61 : Dungeon (3)

“What’s this? Those kids...?”

“Could they be trying to enter the dungeon?”

As Ariel’s group arrived in front of the dungeon, people began to murmur again.

Two young girls, two large wolves, and a small fairy.

It was a party that looked incredibly inadequate.

Other formidable parties had already failed to even tackle the entrance of the dungeon, so Ariel’s group entering seemed like an act of suicide.

“Hey, you shouldn’t go into the dungeon.”

Concerned, an adventurer stopped Ariel’s group.

“Other parties have all failed. This dungeon is unbeatable.”

Sana snorted.

“Pfft, maybe for ‘regular people.’ I can easily conquer the dungeon.”

“You...? You’re just a little kid holding a staff. You even look younger than my sister.”

“Age and skill are separate. Despite my appearance, I’m the top wizard of the Magic Tower. In simpler terms, I’m a genius. There’s no way a genius like me could fail to conquer just one dungeon!”

Confidently, Sana headed towards the entrance of the dungeon, with Ariel hurriedly following behind.

However, Ariel soon stopped and turned back.

Ghost wasn't moving.

With its tail drooping and a timid gaze, Ghost alternated its look between Ariel and the dungeon entrance.

"It seems like it's scared."

Ruga said.

"I've heard that monsters and beasts don't even come near dungeons because of the magic that flows from them."

Ariel approached Ghost and gently stroked its chin as she asked, "Ghost, do you want to wait outside?"

Ghost nodded and then licked Ariel's cheek.

Ariel turned her gaze to the black wolf standing behind Ghost.

A black wolf that looked much larger and stronger than Ghost.

The black wolf had protected Ghost without caring for its own safety during the fight with the owlbear.

So, while Ariel was in the dungeon, it would surely protect Ghost well.

"Well then, I'll be back."

Ariel stroked Ghost's chin one more time before turning her body.

Inside the dungeon, damp and cold air flowed. Moreover, it was so dark that she couldn't see even an inch ahead.

"Light."

As Sana cast her spell, the surroundings suddenly brightened.

Multiple spheres emitting light were created, pushing back the darkness.

Thanks to that, she could now see ahead.

“Hehe, a dungeon, how exciting. Ariel, stay right behind me and don’t fall behind... Aaaah!!”

While speaking, Sana screamed and fell back.

A man was standing next to one of the light-emitting spheres.

Sana immediately raised her staff.

“No, wait!”

At that moment, the man spoke.

“I’m just following you. There’s no need to be on guard.”

The man appeared to be of middle age but had a decent enough appearance.

With a rather handsome face, the man smiled, and although he seemed somewhat suspicious, he didn’t give off any bad intentions.

“I thought you all were underestimating the dungeon, so I followed to act as a guardian.”

“We don’t need a guardian.”

Sana said bluntly while looking around.

Next to her stood Ariel, her face expressionless, and Ruga perched on Ariel’s shoulder.

Aside from this man, there was no one else. It seemed there would be no more surprises from the sudden appearance of others.

“Now, let’s get going, kids.”

The man said that as he began to walk. At that moment, there was a clicking sound, and the ground he stepped on slightly sank.

“Oh.”

The man immediately turned his body, embracing Ariel and Sana as he rolled on the ground.

At the same time, a massive blade passed through the air.

Whoosh!

A trap was triggered.

Once the blade had completely passed, the man dusted himself off and stood up.

“Phew, I almost got sliced in half right from the start. You can thank me later, kids.”

“It was you who triggered the trap in the first place!”

Sana exclaimed roughly as she stood up.

“Besides, I was just about to deploy my shield!”

“But you couldn’t. You survived thanks to me, kid.”

“So the trap was your fault from the start...”

While the two were bickering, Ariel also slowly lifted her body.

“Sister, it looks like it’ll be fun here.”

Ruga said, fixing Ariel’s disheveled hair.

“Honestly, our adventures have been too devoid of crises lately. Well, it’s probably the same here, but somehow it feels like it’ll be a bit enjoyable. I wish Lakia could have come with us.”

Ariel nodded in agreement.

Like Ruga said, the dungeon seemed like it would be fun, and it would have been great if Lakia could have joined them.

But since their mother called for them, there was nothing they could do.

They would just have to come back with Lakia next time and grab the treasure for her today. The shiny thing she mentioned.

Click, click.

At that moment, the man in front put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with a match.

“W-What are you doing, smoking in the dungeon...”

Sana said, incredulous, but the man calmly laughed and exhaled cigarette smoke into the air.

“It doesn’t matter. Dungeons are dangerous. You never know when you might die, so there’s no need to worry about health...”

“Nobody cares about your health. More importantly, cough, cough... what if traps get triggered because of the cigarette smoke? And it stinks.”

“Ooh, look over there.”

At that moment, the man pointed somewhere with his hand.

That place resembled a room with a treasure chest sitting prominently in the center.

“A treasure chest! To find it already, this feels like a good omen.”

The man said in an excited voice, but Sana looked uninterested.

“I have no interest in treasures. My goal is to conquer this dungeon.”

Sana attempted to move on.

But a glance to the side revealed Ariel staring blankly at the treasure chest.

“Ariel, do you want the treasure?”

“Yeah.”

“R-Really? That’s unexpected. According to the Magic Tower master,

elves are a greedy race.”

The man chuckled at Sana’s words.

“Is there really such a race? Every living being has some degree of greed. Now, let’s hurry in and get the treasure. Since I’m the oldest here, I’ll pick first, and the two of you can share what’s left.”

“That’s not fair! Just because of your age... No, wait, if that’s the case, you should lead the way.”

Sana pointed to the room.

“You said you were following as a guardian, right? Then you should go in first.”

“That’s impossible.”

The man shook his head vigorously and stroked his beard with a serious expression.

“I’m not an adventurer, you know? Did you see? I fell for a beginner trap.”

“Then... what’s your identity?”

“I’m a merchant. I originally came to buy treasure. But since the adventurers were being so frustrating, saying this dungeon is dangerous and unbeatable, I decided to come in myself. I happened to see you all entering. Plus, you’re a genius wizard from the Magic Tower, right? I figured it wouldn’t be a problem for me to follow.”

“So the claim of acting as a guardian was...”

“A lie. I want the treasure.”

Sana glared at the man with a look that said, “What a shameless guy.”

Of course, the man remained unfazed, calmly puffing on his cigarette despite Sana’s gaze.

“Well, that means you’re not any help, and yet you want to pick the treasure first. There’s a limit to shamelessness. Ariel gets to pick the treasure first. Then it’s my turn, and you’ll be last.”

“Suit yourself.”

The man readily agreed. For him, simply acquiring the treasure was a win.

“Hmmm.”

Sana cautiously stepped into the room with the treasure chest.

Of course, while Sana trusted her magical skills, she knew anything could happen inside the dungeon, so she couldn’t afford to be careless.

Thud, thud.

The man and Ariel followed behind Sana, and soon the three arrived in front of the treasure chest.

And nothing happened.

“What’s this?”

Sana said in disbelief.

“The trap isn’t activating. Is there really no trap in this room?”

“That can’t be. If so, that means this treasure is free...”

The man extinguished his cigarette on the ground and examined the treasure chest closely.

“There’s no such thing as free. The trap might activate the moment we open this treasure chest. Otherwise, it would mean the treasure in this chest isn’t worth anything.”

“Hmmm.”

While the man and Sana were observing the treasure chest, Ariel looked up and gazed at the ceiling.

Something was falling from the ceiling.

“Ah!”

Sana belatedly realized and raised her staff, but it was already too late.

Crash!

What fell from the ceiling was an iron grate.

Iron bars surrounded the area around the treasure chest.

Thanks to that, the three were now trapped inside the bars.

“What is this? Just a prison? It’s kind of lame, considering it’s the entrance.”

The man said that as he opened the treasure chest.

“Y-You can’t just open it without permission...!”

Sana flinched and stepped back.

Suddenly, the iron bars had fallen from the ceiling, and Sana was a bit startled, her surprised mind not yet settled when the man opened the treasure chest, causing her to feel scared without meaning to.

However, fortunately, even after the treasure chest opened, no traps were triggered.

“Hmm.”

The man took something out of his pocket.

It resembled a fountain pen, and when he pressed the end, light burst forth with a click.

The fountain pen was a magical item used for illuminating dark places.

It had a similar effect to the light spell Sana cast, but magical items could be used by ordinary people who couldn’t use magic.

The man used the light from the magical item to peer inside the treasure chest.

“Oooh... this is amazing?”

Then he smiled broadly.

Chapter 62 : Dungeon (4)

A treasure chest contained a single dagger.

The scabbard looked dark and dull, but the man recognized immediately that this dagger was something extraordinary.

It was unmistakably a magical artifact.

The man carefully drew the dagger.

With a soft *swish*, the dagger slid out smoothly.

The blade also had a black hue, similar to the scabbard.

Just pulling it out felt like some sort of energy was emanating from it.

It felt as if magic would be activated with just a simple swing through the air.

A magical artifact—this was truly a treasure worth calling out for.

“What’s that old thing?”

Sana said disappointingly from the side.

“It’s just a worthless dagger.”

The man looked at Sana in disbelief.

Is she stupid? Does she not know this is a magical artifact? If she understood the value of this dagger...

‘No, maybe it’s a good thing...’

Choosing treasures from the chest went in the order of Ariel first,

then Sana, and the man last.

Currently, there was only this dagger in the treasure chest, so if either Ariel or Sana wanted it, he wouldn't be able to keep it.

He showed the dagger to Sana and Ariel and said,

“Haha, this doesn't seem like it would suit cute girls like you. What do you think? Do you want it?”

Ariel shook her head vigorously, and Sana also turned away her gaze.

Neither of them showed any interest in the dagger.

“Well, I can't help it then.”

The man tried to suppress the corners of his mouth that were about to rise and hung the dagger at his waist.

“I guess I have no choice but to keep it. If a better treasure comes next time, you can have it.”

“Of course. But first, we need to get out of this cage.”

Sana quietly inspected the bars.

The bars had a section that could open like a door, but it was locked.

This meant they needed to unlock it to get out.

“Hmm, it doesn't seem too difficult. Unlock!”

Sana immediately cast a spell. It was a basic magic for unlocking.

Sana's magic staff gleamed with a blue light.

Bang!

But soon, the blue light that had formed on the staff scattered, and Sana staggered as if she had been shocked.

“What, what's going on... The magic didn't work.”

“Haha, you’re foolish. Did you think it would be that easy? If such basic magic could unlock it, there wouldn’t be any need for this kind of setup. This isn’t child’s play.”

At his merciless words, Sana’s face flushed red.

“Then why don’t you give it a try! If you’re so confident!”

“No, no, I told you earlier. I’m a merchant. I don’t have the skill to unlock this. But I suppose I could try to find a key.”

The man began to rummage through the treasure chest and examine the floor in search of a key.

“The key is over there.”

At that moment, Lu pointed outside the bars.

Everyone turned their gaze in that direction.

Outside the bars, at the entrance of the room, a key was visible.

The key was floating in mid-air.

“Oooh, did the bars lower and create the key... If someone was waiting outside, this would have been an easy problem to solve.”

While the man muttered to himself, Lu passed through the bars and returned with the key.

When he inserted the key into the lock and turned it, with a *clank*, the bars opened.

“Thank goodness we have a fairy. If not, it would have been hard to get out of this cage.”

At the man’s words, Lu shrugged.

“Well, even if it wasn’t me, our older sister would be here. She easily opens magical cages.”

“I see.”

The man half-listened to Lu's words and quickly slipped out of the bars. He didn't want to linger inside, fearing something might activate.

"Thanks, Lu."

Sana thanked Lu as she exited the bars, and Ariel followed suit.

"Hmmm."

The man pondered.

His purpose in entering the dungeon was to obtain treasures, and that had already been achieved.

He had acquired a magical artifact worth calling out for.

He no longer needed to risk his life tackling the dungeon.

After leaving the dungeon like this, he could return to the city and sell the magical artifact, surely earning a lot of money.

With that money, he could establish his own business or just comfortably spend his time doing nothing.

As a merchant, prioritizing his own profit was the way to go.

Thus, having obtained the treasure, it was wise to leave now.

However, for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to move.

The man stroked his beard as he looked at Ariel and Sana.

Sana was seriously discussing dungeon tactics, while Ariel quietly listened.

Both were just young girls who seemed like they didn't know anything.

Would it be okay to leave those girls behind in the dungeon?

Of course, Sana seemed to be an excellent magician, and the man was just a merchant, so he wouldn't really be much help.

But what if he left the dungeon like this and those girls ended up in danger or lost their lives?

“Hmmm...”

The man let out a deep sigh.

A merchant should always prioritize his own profit, yet here he was worrying about the safety of girls he had just met—this was clearly a failure of a merchant.

“What are you doing? Hurry up!”

At that moment, Sana shouted from ahead.

Somehow, Sana and Ariel had already started moving toward the next area.

“If you don’t hurry, I’m just going to leave you behind!”

‘Well, I have no choice.’

The man lit a cigarette and started following the two girls.

‘These kids need an adult.’

No matter how much of a magical genius they were, they were still just children.

Children can sometimes make absurd, nonsensical mistakes.

That wouldn’t matter in other places, but here, it was a dungeon where life and death were at stake.

A single moment of negligence or a single mistake could lead to death.

To prevent that, an adult was needed.

Dungeons contain all sorts of traps.

Stepping on the floor might trigger blades to fly out, leaning against the wall could release arrows, the ceiling might suddenly collapse, or

the floor could give way, dropping them into a pit full of spikes—there were many perilous traps.

However, those were all challenges that adventurers could adequately handle.

As long as they weren't careless, they could quickly notice and prepare for them.

In contrast, the being currently blocking the path of Ariel's party was different.

A giant standing about 5 meters tall.

This giant was not something adventurers could handle.

The giant's body glimmered, suggesting it was likely made of bronze.

This meant it was not a living creature.

It was a golem.

"That's the one—the giant adventurers were talking about outside..."

The man muttered quietly.

"It seems that unless we deal with that thing, we won't be able to move to the next area..."

The golem stood with its arms crossed, blocking the path to the next area.

"What are we going to do? Can you handle that thing?"

The man asked, and Sana confidently nodded her head.

"Of course. Dealing with golems is simple. You just need to break the magic stone. Wait here. I'll take care of it right away."

"Uh... Don't you think we need some sort of strategy?"

"No need. I've created golems at the magic tower and faced them directly before. Golems aren't alive, so their movements are simple.

Besides, they're slow. There's no need for a strategy. With one spell, I can break its magic stone."

Sana confidently strode toward the golem.

"Seriously, what's so scary about this golem? It's just a bit bigger and made of bronze. It's obvious. The magic stone of a golem is usually located in the heart or the head. There's no need to search; I can just break both."

Sana summoned two large chunks of ice into the air.

Then the golem noticed Sana and uncrossed its arms.

"Ice Lance!"

As Sana waved her staff, the two ice chunks shot toward the golem at high speed.

Shwoosh!

The golem neither blocked nor dodged. It simply stood there.

"Hmph."

Seeing this, Sana smirked.

Whether the golem was made of bronze, steel, or stone, it didn't matter. Sana's magic was strong enough to destroy them all.

Crash!

Sana's magic struck the golem's head and heart, and without even checking the result, she turned away.

"Done, you can come out now."

At Sana's words, Ariel and the man cautiously stepped out.

"Hey, kid..."

The man said with an awkward smile.

“We seem to be in danger.”

“???”

Sana tilted her head at the man’s words.

At that moment, a thudding sound echoed, and shadows loomed around them.

Sana hurriedly turned around.

Before they knew it, the golem had approached from behind.

The golem raised its massive fist and slammed it down on Sana.

Bang!!

With a loud explosion, the ground shook as if an earthquake had struck, and dust rose into the air.

After a moment, as the dust settled, the spot where the golem had struck was revealed.

The ground was dented, but fortunately, Sana was not there.

Somehow, Sana had moved a considerable distance back.

“?”

Sana felt bewildered.

When the golem’s fist came down, she had shut her eyes tight, unable to think to deploy her shield.

If she had deployed her shield, she would

have been able to block the golem’s punch, but she was too startled to react in time.

Sana had thought she would be crushed flat by the golem’s fist, like a squashed tomato.

But just then, Ariel moved, and by the time Sana opened her eyes

again, she found herself far away.

“A-Ariel, what are you doing...?”

Sana looked at Ariel.

Ariel was walking toward the golem, step by step.

“Hehe, just sit there and watch, human.”

Lu spoke from Ariel’s shoulder.

“You’ll soon see what our older sister is like.”

Chapter 63 : Dungeon (5)

The golem wasn't damaged at all, even after being hit by Sana's magic.

Not only did the magic stone not shatter, but there wasn't even a scratch on it.

Which means...

'It's resisting magic...'

Sana murmured quietly.

'And it's completely immune to my magic as well?'

Though still young, Sana is the chief mage of the Magic Tower.

Especially when it comes to offensive magic, her power is strong enough to astonish even the tower lord.

The fact that her magic had no effect at all meant that the golem's magical defense was far beyond normal.

It was no wonder that the adventurers outside couldn't defeat it.

With such perfect magic defense, the only way to destroy the magic stone was through physical force, but that wouldn't be easy.

How could they destroy a hidden magic stone inside a body made of bronze?

If the golem were smaller and moved slowly, it might be possible.

But the golem was 5 meters tall, and its movements, when it attacked Sana earlier, were faster than expected.

Sana felt her fighting spirit fade.

As much as she didn't want to admit it, the golem was beyond her capabilities.

To face such a monstrous golem, the tower lord would have to be here.

'Ariel is in danger...'

Sana suddenly stood up.

If she couldn't handle the golem, then Ariel wouldn't be able to either.

Earlier, on their way to the dungeon, she had asked Ariel what kind of magic she could use, and Ariel had said she only knew Magic Missile and Shield.

It was absurd to think Ariel could face the golem with only basic spells.

Sana didn't know what kind of courage was driving Ariel to approach the golem, but if the golem swung its fist down, Ariel would be crushed flat.

Like a squashed tomato.

But Ariel had already reached the golem.

Sana quickly cast Shield on her staff.

If the golem tried to smash Ariel with its fist, she could block one or two attacks with the Shield.

'In that time, I'll save Ariel...'

"?"

At that moment, Sana froze and blinked in confusion.

A shocking scene was unfolding before her.

Ariel was throwing the golem.

Ariel found the golem fascinating.

It was made of bronze yet moved like a person.

Of course, she knew it was due to magic, but still, it was intriguing to see such a massive bronze object move.

Ariel decided to test the golem's durability.

With a leap, she grabbed its arm and flung it far away.

Boom!

The golem crashed into the wall.

The impact broke the wall a little, but the golem was fine.

There wasn't a single scratch on its bronze body.

The golem stood up and looked at Ariel. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say it faced her, as its face was just bronze without eyes, nose, or mouth.

Still, the golem somehow seemed angry.

It began charging at Ariel with frightening speed.

Each time the golem ran, the ground shook.

Its 5-meter height meant it must weigh a lot as well.

Ariel waited for the golem to get closer, then jumped high and swung her hand.

Smack!

She slapped the golem's cheek.

This time, she put in a fair amount of strength, and the golem flew even faster than before, slamming into the wall.

Crash!

The wall crumbled more than last time, and the golem struggled, crawling on the ground as if it couldn't regain its senses.

The area where Ariel had slapped it was torn, and half of its face was hanging off.

The golem barely stood up and charged at Ariel again.

It had been hit twice but still didn't back down. It was hard to tell if it was brave or just mindless.

Either way, Ariel decided it was time to finish this. She already knew how much force was needed to hurt the golem.

The golem reached out to grab Ariel, its large hand stretching towards her.

Whoosh!

But it only grasped at empty air.

Ariel had already jumped and landed on the golem's head.

Her movement was so fast that the golem couldn't even register it.

Ariel raised her hand and chopped down on the golem's head.

It was a move similar to the one she had used in a breaking competition in the Dwarf Mountains.

Thud!

With a heavy sound, the golem began to crumble.

'Unbelievable.'

The man couldn't hide his shock as he looked at the scattered bronze dust on the floor.

'What just happened?'

A tiny girl had turned the bronze golem into dust.

The same golem that countless adventurers outside couldn't defeat, and that hadn't been harmed at all by Sana's magic, had been destroyed with bare hands.

'Who in the world is she?'

The man turned to look at Ariel.

She looked like just a frail young girl.

Aside from being an elf with pointed ears, there wasn't anything particularly special about her.

She wasn't muscular, and she wasn't even holding a magic staff like Sana.

She was just an ordinary adventurer, if that.

'That weak-looking arm shattered a bronze golem...?'

And that wasn't even the most surprising part.

Ariel's strength was shockingly powerful, but her reaction speed was equally astounding.

Earlier, when the golem had tried to punch Sana, the man had expected Sana to die.

He had expected her to be crushed under the golem's fist.

But Ariel had moved, pulling both Sana and the man to safety.

Her speed had been so fast, it was invisible to the eye.

"Ariel, are you hurt...?"

Sana walked over, looking at Ariel with concern, but Ariel was completely unscathed.

Sizzle. Sizzle.

The man stopped thinking and lit a cigarette. He gave up trying to understand Ariel.

In a world where Demon Kings and Heroes existed, it was better for one's mental health to simply accept the existence of extraordinary beings like Ariel.

Sana seemed to agree, smiling as she spoke to Ariel.

"I'm glad. You must have trained so hard, Ariel! To take down a bronze golem with sheer strength, that's amazing!"

"..."

The man exhaled a puff of smoke and silently stared into space.

Could something like that really be possible with just training? He wanted to argue with Sana.

"Want some?"

Ariel held something out to him.

In her hand was a sweet-looking cake.

"Wow, that looks delicious."

Sana eagerly took the cake and bit into it, but the man stared at Ariel with a shocked expression.

'Did she just pull that cake out of thin air?'

This wasn't entirely incomprehensible.

There were magic artifacts, after all.

Magic artifacts varied widely.

The dagger hanging from the man's waist probably had some offensive magic attached to it, and some items could activate spatial magic.

Ariel must have had such an artifact.

'She's definitely not an ordinary kid. I should be a little more...'

Before he could finish his thought, something was shoved into his mouth.

It was cake.

Ariel had forced the cake into his mouth while he was standing there, dumbfounded.

"Ah, thanks."

He took a big bite of the cake.

Chew, chew.

A sweet taste spread through his mouth.

After defeating the bronze golem, the group continued deeper into the dungeon.

To fully conquer the dungeon, they needed to remove something called the 'Core of the Dungeon.'

The core was said to be alive, or some claimed it was a monster, but its exact nature was unknown.

No one had ever been able to explain why dungeons formed in the first place.

The only certainty was that there were great treasures within the dungeon, and until the core was destroyed, traps would continue to activate.

The bronze golem that Ariel had crushed would eventually be restored as time passed.

"Ah, look over there!"

Sana pointed at something.

It was a treasure chest sitting in a space beside the stairs leading further down the dungeon.

This was their second treasure chest.

The group headed straight for it.

This time, it wasn't in a room, so they didn't need to worry about traps.

"These usually trigger traps when you open them. Stay on guard."

The man said as he opened the chest.

Clunk.

The group waited for a moment, but thankfully no traps activated.

The man was the first to look inside the chest.

"Oh, you two will like this one, I think."

At his words, Ariel peeked into the chest and slowly smiled.

As the man said, this time there was a treasure they liked.

Ariel pulled out the treasure.

It was a sparkling necklace.

"Now this is a real treasure. That rusty dagger we found before doesn't even compare."

Sana's remark made the man give a bitter smile.

Sure, the necklace was shiny and expensive-looking, but it was nothing compared to a magic artifact.

The man was grateful that both Sana and Ariel were naive kids who didn't know much about the world.

"So, do you like it? If you do, it's yours. I'm not interested in treasure anyway. My goal is to clear the dungeon."

"Thank you."

Ariel quietly gazed at the necklace in her hand.

The way it sparkled was quite pretty.

She thought Lakia would really like it, and it would suit her well around her neck.

Chapter 64 : Dungeon (6)

“Hmm, I’m sure Lakia would like this necklace, sis. It sparkles so brightly.”

“Yeah.”

While Ariel and Lu were examining the necklace, Sana quietly pondered to herself.

‘But when it comes to magic, I’m a step ahead.’

Sure, Ariel was strong and fast, but the only spells she knew were Magic Missile and Shield.

At least in terms of magic, Sana was definitely superior.

So, there was no need to feel down just because she couldn’t defeat the Bronze Golem.

It was simply a different field, and Sana was still the top genius mage of the Magic Tower.

‘I’ll have to save Ariel next time.’

Just then, the ground began to shake as if an earthquake had struck.

“Huh, what’s going on? Did a trap activate?”

A man muttered beside her, and Sana lifted her gaze, focusing on the front.

A strong, sinister energy was emanating from ahead.

‘This is...’

Then, a shrill screech echoed as something rapidly rushed toward

them.

‘A-a monster!’

Sana quickly cast a Shield.

A blue barrier formed in front of the party, and a powerful impact struck against it.

Boom!

A massive scorpion-shaped monster had collided with the Shield.

Sana truly was the top mage of the Magic Tower.

The speed at which she deployed the Shield was fast, and despite the force of the monster’s attack, the Shield held firm.

It was something no other mage of her age in the Magic Tower could have done.

“Both of you, step back. I’ll handle this monster.”

Sana began casting an attack spell with her magic staff as she walked forward.

Though she had shown an embarrassing side earlier while fighting the Bronze Golem, this time would be different.

This massive scorpion monster didn’t have any magical defenses. If it had, Sana would have sensed it when it hit the Shield earlier.

‘It’s certain. I can handle this monster.’

With a determined expression, Sana dismissed the Shield.

Her attack spell was already fully cast.

Now, all she had to do was defeat the monster with a powerful and dazzling spell.

That way, she could make up for her earlier blunder and restore her reputation as the top mage of the Magic Tower.

“Kieeek!”

The monster lunged at Sana, and she raised her magic staff.

“Inferno...”

Just as Sana was about to unleash her spell, a blue light shot past her.

It was Ariel’s Magic Missile.

A small hole appeared between the monster’s eyes.

The creature, its brain destroyed, collapsed lifelessly to the ground with a thud.

Ariel briskly walked over and stored the monster’s corpse in her inventory.

The condition of the body was top-notch. If she sold it to a place that dealt in scorpion cuisine, she could make a decent amount of money.

Ariel smiled faintly.

She had gotten both the sparkling necklace and the massive scorpion corpse. Indeed, dungeons were wonderful places.

Now, all that was left was to find the treasures for Lu and Sana.

“Aah...”

A despondent groan came from behind.

When Ariel turned, she saw Sana sitting on the ground, tears welling in her eyes.

“I-I was supposed to defeat it... I could’ve done it...”

“...I’m sure you could have. I saw it. There was a spark at the tip of your magic staff. That must’ve been an incredibly powerful spell, right?”

Beside her, a man patted Sana’s shoulder, trying to comfort her.

“Wow, being able to cast such a powerful spell—you really are amazing. You’re definitely different from other mages as the top of the Magic Tower.”

“But... I didn’t defeat it. Sniff... I’m... useless...”

“No, no. Don’t say that. You’re not useless. There will be more monsters, I’m sure. Next time, you’ll defeat them spectacularly.”

Though the man was comforting Sana, he wasn’t sure why he was doing it.

Who cared who defeated the monster? The important thing was that no one got hurt.

‘But I guess it’s different for her.’

She had boasted about being the top mage of the Magic Tower and a genius, only to nearly die to a golem and fail to defeat the monster.

Even if the golem was understandable, Ariel had been faster in dealing with the monster.

It was enough to wound her pride and lower her self-esteem.

“Sniff... I should’ve never left the Magic Tower... Someone like me...”

“But you stopped the monster, didn’t you? That blue barrier—you cast that, right? It was amazing. If not for that, we might’ve been killed by the monster. So really, you and that elf kid worked together to defeat it.”

“Sniff... sob...”

‘...This is exhausting.’

The man scratched his head and glanced at Ariel.

Ariel tilted her head, staring at Sana, clearly not understanding why she was upset.

The man leaned closer to Ariel's pointy ear and whispered an explanation.

After hearing the man's words, Ariel's eyes widened. It seemed she had finally realized her mistake.

'Wait, was it really a mistake...?'

From the man's perspective, Ariel's quick disposal of the monster had been the right call. She had handled it cleanly and swiftly with a single spell.

Honestly, Sana wouldn't have been able to do that.

She would've cast grand, flashy spells that would have left the surroundings in disarray.

That's just how mages fought.

'But still... what was that just now?'

The man rubbed his chin, lost in thought.

The blue light that had shot from Ariel's fingers...

It had pierced the monster's forehead with incredible speed and precision.

The monster probably didn't even realize what had happened before it died.

'That's a terrifyingly dangerous spell...'

To end a life with a single, sudden beam of death—Ariel was starting to seem scary.

'What is this elf really...?'

This wasn't something for the top mage of the Magic Tower to feel bad about.

Shattering the Bronze Golem with a single hand and obliterating a monster with a beam of light from her finger—he had never seen

anyone like that.

If such a being existed...

‘Wait.’

The man’s eyes widened.

‘A d-dragon?!’

Surely, only a dragon could do something like that.

‘No, that can’t be right. Why would a dragon enter a dungeon?’

He chuckled and shook his head.

‘And hanging around with a fairy? There’s no way. If there were such a dragon, they’d be a complete oddball.’

Meanwhile, while the man was lost in thought, Ariel cautiously approached Sana.

“Sniff, sob...”

Sana was still sitting on the ground, tears streaming down her face. Her magic staff lay discarded beside her.

Ariel hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to say.

According to what the man had told her, Sana’s self-esteem was bruised.

She had boasted about being the top mage of the Magic Tower, only to nearly be defeated by the golem and have the monster taken down by Ariel.

“I... I should just return to the Magic Tower...”

“Hey.”

Ariel crouched in front of Sana, lowering herself to her level. Sana, her face still tear-stained, looked up at her.

“Huh? Why...?”

Sana was still just a child, crying for childish reasons. Ariel had decided to comfort her.

“Could you...”

Ariel wiped away Sana’s tears and asked softly.

“Teach me magic?”

Sana blinked in surprise.

“Teach you... magic?”

“Yeah.”

“But, Ariel, you don’t need it. Your Magic Missile is so strong... Plus, you’re so powerful... Why would you want to learn from someone like me...?”

Just then, the man chimed in from the side.

“Ha! If not the top mage of the Magic Tower, who else could teach her? Only you can do it. Now, stop crying. Cheer up and teach this elf kid some magic.”

Sana looked at Ariel again.

“So, Ariel, you want to be my apprentice...?”

“Yeah.”

“You really want to learn magic from me?”

“Yeah.”

“Sniff... sniff... hehehe.”

Sana, still tearful, broke into a smile.

“Alright, I’ll teach you magic, just for you!”

She stood up with a burst of energy and tapped the ground with her magic staff.

“Ariel, what kind of magic do you want to learn? Just tell me, and I’ll teach you everything! I’ve mastered almost all kinds of magic!”

Ariel thought for a moment.

Honestly, she didn’t need to learn magic.

With all her stats being infinite, having just Magic Missile and Shield was more than enough for her adventures.

Besides, with Lakia—the most talented race in magic—traveling with her, there had never been a situation where Ariel needed to use magic.

This was just to help restore Sana’s confidence.

It didn’t really matter what kind of magic she learned.

But, since she was going to learn something, Ariel thought carefully and soon made a decision.

“Ariel, because it’s you, I’ll teach you. If it were anyone else, it would take them a long time just to learn how to manipulate mana and start studying magic. But you already know how to use magic, so you’ll pick it up quickly.”

Sana looked at Ariel with a face full of anticipation.

“So, Ariel, what kind of magic do you want to learn?”

Chapter 65 : Dungeon (7)

Sana's magic lecture had begun.

It felt absurd for it to happen in a dungeon of all places, but there was no choice if they wanted to help Sana regain her confidence.

The man sat a little distance away, smoking a cigarette and fiddling with his magic weapon, a dagger, while Ariel stood expressionless and began listening to Sana's lecture.

Sana was the head magician of the Magic Tower, currently its most promising talent, and the Tower Master's pick for the next Grand Magician.

She had a magical gift bestowed by the heavens.

Sana's ability to understand magic was well above average. She could easily grasp any spell, quickly mastering it and astonishing those around her.

That was fine so far. Geniuses are supposed to be like that.

But what if she was teaching instead of learning?

"Uh, so, first, you gather mana... and then, you'll need the will to lift the object..."

At least when it came to teaching, Sana was utterly incompetent.

"Oh, and the circuit and the magic formula go like this..."

Sana herself had no idea what she was saying, and neither did the man, Ariel, or Lu, who were all watching in bewilderment.

"So, if you do this... ta-da!"

A pebble on the ground floated gently into the air.

“How was that? Can you do it, Ariel?”

Ariel had wanted to learn telekinesis magic from Sana.

To be honest, now that she was actually learning, all magic seemed useful.

There was the location-tracking spell Lakia had cast, the magic that cleaned the area, the spell that repaired broken items, and the healing magic...

Then there were the spells Sana cast right after entering the dungeon—like the magic that lit up the darkness and unlocked locks. All of them seemed useful.

However, learning them all would take considerable time, so Ariel decided to focus on learning what seemed the most practical—‘the magic to move objects.’

The magic for moving objects is also known as ‘telekinesis,’ and it requires an understanding of the wind element.

You need to be able to manipulate elements to cast spells associated with them.

For instance, a cleaning spell requires an understanding of the elements of wind and water.

But Ariel had no understanding of the elements whatsoever.

Actually, Ariel didn’t understand a thing about magic.

The magic missile or shield she cast were merely skills; she didn’t know about formulas or circuits.

She could activate them with sheer willpower alone.

But when it came to mana, she thought she understood it.

The powerful energy flowing through her body—that, Ariel believed,

was mana. She could even sense its movement when she activated her skills.

Ariel slowly summoned her mana.

She skipped the formula and circuit Sana had explained and simply released her mana, focusing on the will to lift the pebble.

The pebble floated gently in the air.

It was telekinesis magic.

“Wow, you did it, Ariel!”

Sana clapped her hands, delighted.

“As expected of my student! You learned that incredibly fast. Was my explanation that good? Haha, anyway, you’re amazing!”

Sana patted Ariel on the head, looking pleased, while Ariel smiled faintly and moved the pebble up and down.

Meanwhile, the man looked on in disbelief.

‘What... is that?’

Having listened to Sana’s magic lecture himself, he was sure of one thing.

Sana’s teaching was a mess. Her explanations were vague and disjointed.

It was more like, ‘There are circuits and formulas, but anyway, just gather your mana and somehow do it. The key is willpower.’

Yet Ariel had succeeded anyway. At this point, it seemed like Ariel could have done it even without Sana’s guidance.

‘Well, it’s none of my business.’

In any case, Ariel had learned magic, and Sana had regained her confidence.

It was a bit strange, but the problem was solved.

“Hmm, but something feels off... Did you really understand the elements, Ariel?”

At that moment, Sana's expression turned serious.

“I feel like I didn't explain that properly....”

“Wow!”

The man quickly cut off Sana and stood up.

“As expected of the Tower's head magician! Learning from a genius means you can pick it up this quickly! This is something that can't be explained with words! Incredible!”

Sana gave a sly smile at his words.

No matter how many times you hear it, being called a genius feels good. Especially now, when her self-esteem was just starting to recover, it gave her a sense of stability.

“Hehe, well, that's true.”

Sana once again looked proud.

“Of course she learned quickly because I taught her! After all, I'm the head magician of the Magic Tower!”

Watching this, the man quietly breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Phew.’

And then he let out a quiet sigh.

‘This is exhausting...’

All he wanted now was to finish conquering the dungeon and get some rest.

The party continued deeper into the dungeon.

There were no longer any trivial traps being triggered, nor did monsters suddenly ambush them.

There was only silence.

The deeper the silence, the more anxious the man became. It felt like the calm before the storm, as if something bigger and more dangerous than anything they had encountered so far was about to happen.

It was natural to be on edge.

“Wow, doing it like that really makes things easier. Why didn’t I think of this before?”

But Ariel and Sana showed no signs of tension.

Since learning telekinesis, Ariel had taken a cake out of her inventory and was using telekinesis to shove it into her mouth.

It was what you could call ‘eating cake without using your hands.

The man found it a little absurd that she had learned magic only to use it for something so trivial, but Sana seemed quite impressed.

“I should try it too. Ariel, do you have more cake?”

“Yeah. Plenty.”

The man quietly turned his gaze to Lu, who was flying next to them.

He hoped that maybe this fairy, at least, would realize the seriousness of the situation, but...

“Ugh, it’s too dark... The darkness makes me sad... I wonder where Lakia and Ghost are now...”

Lu was rambling incoherently, drunk on fruit wine.

Drinking alcohol in a dungeon was unthinkable, but it didn’t seem to matter to this fairy.

After all, Ariel was an exceptionally strong being, and whether the

fairy was drunk or not, it would just tag along anyway.

And the man himself wasn't particularly helpful in conquering the dungeon either.

The man spoke to Lu.

"Your name is Lu, right?"

"Huh? What do you want, human?"

"If possible, I'd like to have a drink too."

"Oh, this fruit wine?"

"Yeah."

"Sure. Drinking buddies are always welcome."

And so, the man and Lu began sharing the fruit wine while Ariel and Sana stuffed themselves with cake using telekinesis.

The atmosphere was more like a picnic than a dungeon conquest.

A little while later, Ariel, with her mouth full of cake, stopped in her tracks and looked to the side.

There was a treasure chest.

It was the third treasure chest they had come across.

"Ah, it's a treasure chest."

Sana, her cheeks puffed out with cake, pointed to the chest.

"Ariel, how about trying to move that with telekinesis?"

At Sana's suggestion, Ariel nodded and cast telekinesis.

The treasure chest floated into the air and drifted towards Ariel.

"Haha, you're really good at this. As expected of my student."

Sana praised her casually, but if another magician had been watching, they would have been shocked.

Even though telekinesis was a basic spell, it wasn't easy to learn so quickly and use it so naturally.

Lifting a pebble off the ground was one thing, but moving a treasure chest required a considerable amount of mana and magical skill.

But for Ariel, it wasn't a problem.

Her mana was limitless, and somehow, she could control magic effortlessly.

The treasure chest floated close, then with a soft click, it opened, revealing its contents.

It was a blue-glowing ring.

Ariel lifted the ring onto her palm. As she did, the ring shrank slightly in size.

"Oh, it shrank on its own."

Sana said, her eyes sparkling.

"That ring must be a magical artifact. Ariel, try putting it on."

Ariel slid the ring onto her finger.

It fit perfectly. It seemed that the ring had adjusted its size to match Ariel's finger.

"How does it feel, Ariel? Does it seem like there's some kind of magic on that ring?"

At Sana's question, Ariel tilted her head in confusion.

She had put on the ring, but she had no idea what kind of magic was on it.

She could feel something emanating from it, but couldn't quite tell...

Flash!

Suddenly, Ariel's figure vanished.

"A... Ariel...?"

"Sis...?"

"...??"

The rest of the party blinked and looked around, but Ariel was nowhere to be seen.

All that was left was the cake she had been levitating, now dropped to the floor.

Chapter 66 : Dungeon (8)

“Poor elf...”

At the sound of the voice from the front, Ariel lifted her head.

As she slipped on a magical ring and examined what enchantment was on it, she was suddenly transported to another location.

The place Ariel found herself in was a space that looked like a large room. Lanterns were burning on the walls, making it easy to see the surroundings even without Sana's light magic.

“Foolish elf...”

In the center of the space, something stood tall, looking down at Ariel.

It was a giant snake, but bizarrely, the upper body was that of a human woman.

“Insignificant elf...”

The woman's hair was writhing. Upon closer inspection, they weren't hairs, but small snakes.

Countless snakes hung from the woman's head, flicking their tongues towards Ariel.

Ariel had a good idea of what this creature was.

A being like this could only be 'Medusa.'

“I am the guardian of the dungeon's core... How foolish of you to come this far without fear...”

At Medusa's words, Ariel glanced around.

If Medusa was the guardian of the dungeon's core, that meant the core was nearby.

Breaking the core would end the dungeon raid.

"Hehe, it seems you already know about me, judging by the way you're looking around... But avoiding my gaze won't help..."

The snakes on Medusa's head stretched out, coiling around Ariel's limbs.

Lifting her up, Medusa pulled Ariel close to her face.

Now Ariel was face-to-face with Medusa.

"Look into my eyes... little elf..."

Medusa's eyes flashed gray.

The petrification ability.

It was Medusa's terrifying power to turn anyone who met her gaze into stone.

Among adventurers, there was a saying that when you encounter Medusa, you must run away immediately.

Medusa could turn parts of her body into stone, making her defense formidable, and she could manipulate the snakes on her head at will, making her a tricky opponent.

And most of all...

The moment you met Medusa's gaze, you'd turn to stone. Combat against her was nearly impossible.

Once turned to stone, there was no returning unless Medusa reversed the spell.

Medusa would drag the petrified victim to her lair and devour them whole, swallowing them in their stone form.

Once they were inside her stomach, she would then release the

petrification spell to digest them.

It was truly a horrifying power. It was no wonder adventurers ran at the sight of her.

But what if you were already caught like Ariel?

In such a situation, seasoned adventurers would say:

“Never! Never look into Medusa’s eyes! The moment you do, it’s over! You’ll turn to stone!”

But there was no one to give such advice to Ariel.

Ariel, merely curious, locked eyes with Medusa.

Staring intently, as if trying to bore through her.

Then, a flicker of confusion appeared in Medusa’s gray eyes.

“W-what... Why isn’t it working? Why aren’t you turning to stone?”

Medusa attempted to use her petrification power again.

Flash!

But nothing happened. Ariel continued to look at Medusa blankly, showing no signs of turning to stone.

“Something’s wrong... In that case...”

Medusa began to tighten the snakes around Ariel’s neck.

Since her petrification ability wasn’t working, she intended to choke Ariel to death.

“Heh, foolish elf, I don’t know what you’ve done, but do you think not turning to stone will change your fate? In the end, you’ll be a delicious meal for me. Elf flesh is so tender... Ugh!”

At that moment, there was a sharp crack, and Medusa’s neck snapped at a right angle.

The light in Medusa's gray eyes faded, and her mouth hung open.

She was dead.

By Ariel's telekinesis spell.

Ariel had tested whether telekinesis could be used offensively, and the result was far more effective than expected.

With telekinesis, there was no need to pierce the opponent's forehead; she could simply snap their neck.

This way, the corpse could be preserved in perfect condition.

The snakes that had coiled around Ariel's body slithered away, and Medusa's massive body fell with a thud.

As Ariel disappeared, the rest of the group hurried towards the dungeon core.

It seemed likely that Ariel's sudden disappearance was due to a dungeon trap, and breaking the core would be the fastest way to free her.

Destroying the core would stop the trap.

"Huff, huff..."

The party, without resting, ran until they stood before a massive door at the dungeon's end.

Beyond this door would be the guardian protecting the core. Only after defeating the guardian could they destroy the core.

"You two stay behind me. I'll take on the guardian."

At Sana's words, the man and Lu nodded and took a step back.

Since neither the man nor Lu had combat abilities, Sana was the only one capable of facing the guardian.

The man looked at Sana with a concerned expression.

“...Kid, I trust your skills, but still, be careful. There’s something odd about this dungeon.”

“Odd?”

“Two magical items have come out. Usually, it’s hard to get even one.”

“Two?”

Sana tilted her head and then glanced at the dagger hanging from the man’s waist.

“Oh, that dagger is a magical item?”

She hadn’t noticed earlier, but the dagger hanging from the man’s waist was indeed a magical item.

“Here.”

The man unbuckled the dagger from his waist, scratched his head, and offered it to Sana.

“You take it. I haven’t done much in this dungeon anyway.”

Magical items were extremely valuable. Selling it could surely bring a fortune.

But despite that, the man chose to reveal the dagger’s value to Sana and offered it to her.

Though it was a bit late, his conscience had been pricked. It wasn’t typical of him.

Sana, after quietly staring at the dagger, shook her head.

“Hmph, I don’t need it. Why would I want such an old, dull thing? You keep it.”

“But kid, do you know how rare...”

“Enough. I’m the Tower’s chief magician. I don’t need something like that.”

Sana turned her head sharply and looked at the door. The man awkwardly reattached the dagger to his waist.

“Hey...”

Beside him, Lu, arms crossed, grumbled.

“We don’t have time for this. We need to clear the dungeon and find my sister. Though I’m sure she’s fine.”

The man silently agreed with Lu. After all, what could possibly endanger that monster?

Unless a dragon showed up, there was no way that elven girl would be in danger.

‘Or maybe... even a dragon wouldn’t stand a chance... against her...’

Creak!

Sana opened the door.

Light poured out from the opening, and the man and Lu took another step back.

With attack magic fully cast on her staff, Sana calmly walked into the room.

“Hm?”

She locked eyes with Ariel, who was standing idly inside the room.

“Ariel?”

“Sister?”

“??”

The group rushed over to Ariel.

Naturally, Ariel was unharmed.

“We were worried when you suddenly disappeared, Ariel. How did

you end up here?”

At Sana’s question, Ariel slowly shook her head, indicating that she didn’t know either.

“Hmm.”

Sana looked at the ring on Ariel’s finger.

“Is it because of that ring? The magic on that ring...”

Zap!

Ariel vanished again.

But this time, she hadn’t completely disappeared.

Ariel was now standing right behind Sana.

“Aha, I get it.”

Sana smiled and nodded.

“The magic on that ring is ‘Blink.’ Yep, no doubt.”

Blink.

A spell that allowed instantaneous movement.

It would be useful in emergencies, but due to its high mana consumption and difficult casting, it wasn’t commonly used in battle.

Using a shield would be more efficient than casting Blink.

“If that ring has Blink magic... wow, that’s pretty handy. Perfect for emergencies.”

Magical items could be used by non-magicians too.

In other words, even an ordinary person could use Blink just by wearing that ring.

“Hmm, that ring could fetch a fortune...” the man muttered.

“You might be able to buy an entire city with it.”

“Really?”

Sana blinked in surprise, but then gave the man a sidelong glance.

“But that ring belongs to Ariel. You already got that dagger, so don’t get greedy.”

“Haha.”

The man waved his hand dismissively.

“I may be greedy for money, but I’m not that bad. That ring is definitely beyond my means, and I’m more than satisfied with this dagger. But aren’t you tempted? Even someone like you might want that ring.”

At the man’s words, Sana shook her head.

“Guess you don’t know much about magicians. A magician doesn’t rely on magical items. It’s a matter of pride.”

“...Is that so?”

The man scratched his chin.

From what he’d seen, plenty of magicians did use magical items.

For instance, the ‘Light Pen’ the man carried was something magicians used quite frequently.

It was convenient, after all.

‘But well, this kid...’

The man had observed that Sana took immense pride in her own magic. It made sense that she wouldn’t want to depend on magical items.

Meanwhile, Ariel, listening to Sana and the man’s conversation, quietly thought to herself.

The Blink magic on this ring was quite interesting, but Ariel felt she didn't really need the ring.

Ariel could move as fast, if not faster, than Blink, and she didn't foresee any emergencies that would require it.

In her mind, there was someone else who needed this ring.

"Lu."

Ariel took the ring off her finger and handed it to Lu.

"Take it."

"?!"

Lu's eyes widened in surprise.

Chapter 67 : Dungeon (9)

The ring shrunk to fit Lu's finger, just as it had adjusted to Ariel's.

Lu stared at the ring on his finger in disbelief.

"L-Lady... Thank you so much... I don't know if I'm worthy of receiving something so valuable..."

Even though Lu was a fairy with no real connection to magical artifacts, he knew how precious they were.

Of course, the value varied greatly depending on the type of artifact and the magic it contained, but according to the man, this ring might be worth enough to buy an entire city.

Lu thought that sounded about right.

A ring that adjusted to fit the wearer's finger—didn't that mean any race could use it?

It was naturally bound to be priceless.

Pa-bat.

Lu's body disappeared from his spot.

"Whoa."

The place Lu reappeared was on top of Ariel's head.

"This lets you teleport to any desired location."

Blink allowed the caster to teleport to a desired location.

That was how the magic worked, and the same applied to the Blink cast on this ring.

Lu experimented with the Blink attached to the ring, and thanks to his tests, he discovered a few things.

First, Blink couldn't be used indefinitely.

It could be used up to three times in a row, but after that, there was about a minute-long cooldown.

It made sense. When a mage cast magic, there was always a cooldown of sorts.

The difference was that using a magical artifact didn't consume mana, nor did it require any casting time.

In that respect, the Blink on this ring was much more efficient than what a mage could cast.

"Hehe, now I won't have to worry about being caught by humans and ending up in a magic cage. Well, I guess that wouldn't happen anyway as long as I'm with Lady Ariel."

The next thing Lu discovered was the distance of the teleport.

Blink didn't let the caster teleport to just any place they wanted.

There was clearly a limit to how far one could teleport.

For Lu, it seemed to be about 10 meters.

This was the same for a mage's Blink spell. Depending on mana consumption and the mage's proficiency, it was possible to teleport a bit farther, but it was only a slight increase.

In the end, Blink was a magic used in emergencies, not as a method of transportation.

As Sana quietly observed the ring, she spoke.

"Then, maybe Ariel didn't trigger a trap earlier but used Blink instead?"

But she soon had a puzzled look on her face.

“No, but something still feels off...”

The distance Ariel had traveled earlier was far more than 10 meters.

Moreover, Blink only allowed teleportation to a location the caster was aware of, and Ariel couldn't have known this place.

After all, this was their first time in this dungeon.

“Hmm...”

Neither Sana nor the man could come up with an answer.

It remained a mystery whether Ariel had disappeared due to the Blink attached to the magical artifact or because a dungeon trap had been triggered.

Of course, Ariel had her suspicions.

Earlier, when she had been examining the magic on the ring, she had drawn in a lot of mana—no, quite a lot of it. In that moment, the surrounding space had changed.

Perhaps the mana she had drawn and the Blink on the magical artifact had interacted.

As a result, she had ended up in the Guardian's room, bypassing the 10-meter limit.

But that was uncertain and ultimately unimportant.

The Guardian had been defeated, and they had reunited.

“Hm...”

At that moment, Sana tilted her head.

“By the way, Ariel, wasn't there something in this room? There should've been a Guardian, right?”

Sana had entered this room feeling quite determined.

Defeating the Guardian was the final hurdle in conquering a

dungeon.

She believed that only she could achieve that, especially with Ariel having suddenly disappeared.

To be honest, Sana was a little excited.

Defeating the Guardian, clearing the dungeon, and saving Ariel—it all sounded pretty impressive.

If she managed that, Sana was certain she'd regain her confidence.

But now, Ariel was already found, and there was no sign of the Guardian.

At that moment, the man subtly shook his head while looking at Ariel.

The truth was, the man had already figured out what was going on.

No Guardian in the dungeon?

Impossible.

It meant that the little elf girl had already taken care of the Guardian. Judging by the situation, there was no room for doubt.

However, if he said that, Sana might start crying again like she did earlier.

'I absolutely must not tell the truth...'

Maybe Ariel had sensed his thoughts.

She gave him a slight nod before turning back to Sana.

"There wasn't anything. Nothing at all."

"Oh, really? Is that even possible? Dungeons are supposed to have a Guardian to protect the core, right?"

Sana tilted her head, deep in thought, while Ariel quietly averted her gaze.

The Guardian, a Medusa, lay broken in Ariel's inventory.

But Ariel kept playing innocent, and the man secretly breathed a sigh of relief.

Lu chipped in with a comment as well.

"Maybe the Guardian fled, knowing that the Archmage of the Magic Tower was coming?"

Fairies were known to be perceptive.

Lu had already figured out the whole situation—the events that had unfolded, Ariel's lie, and even the reason for the lie.

"Oh, really? Could a Guardian even flee from a dungeon?"

Sana frowned, confused.

At that moment, the man lit a cigarette and spoke with a serious expression.

"It's entirely possible. Dungeons are inherently unpredictable. There's nothing strange about a Guardian running away in fear. Kid, thanks to you, we conquered the dungeon without fighting the Guardian. Impressive. As expected from the Archmage of the Magic Tower."

At his words, Sana's lips twitched upward.

"Aha!"

Sana burst into laughter, clearly in a good mood.

"The Guardian was such a coward! Running away without even fighting—what a wimp! Geez, next time I come to a dungeon, should I hide my identity? Hah, so boring."

Sana happily tapped the ground with her magic staff.

Ariel was quietly floating around using telekinesis, while Lu and the man exchanged knowing glances, nodding at each other.

For now, the situation was resolved.

The man exhaled a puff of smoke and looked at Sana.

“Since you’re the reason we succeeded, why don’t you destroy the dungeon core? Let’s finish this.”

“Oh, right. The dungeon core. I’ll take care of that. Just wait a moment.”

Sana spun around and started walking.

At the far end of the room, there was another door. Beyond that door was likely the dungeon core.

Once they destroyed it, the dungeon would be conquered.

“By the way...”

Lu took a sip of fruit wine and handed it to the man as he asked.

“What kind of magic do you think is on that dagger?”

Lu’s gaze shifted to the dagger hanging from the man’s waist.

“Hmm, not sure...”

The man took the fruit wine from Lu and gulped it down. Then, wiping his mouth, he shrugged.

“Since it’s a dagger, it’s probably something like an attack spell?”

“Why don’t you try it out? I’m curious.”

“Oh, why not? I mean, I’ll need to know its abilities if I’m going to sell it anyway.”

The man drew the dagger.

“Let’s see what kind of magic it holds.”

Then, he casually swung the dagger through the air.

In that moment—

Whoosh!

A massive energy blade formed and shot toward the direction Sana was walking.

“Huh?”

The man let out a dumbfounded sound, and Lu blinked in wide-eyed surprise.

“Huh? What’s this—Aaaaah!”

Sana, sensing the energy blade, turned her head and screamed as she quickly dodged to the side.

“What is that!?”

The energy blade passed by Sana and struck the door leading to the dungeon core.

Boom!

The door shattered easily, and the dungeon core inside was split in two.

The energy blade from the man’s swing had destroyed the dungeon core.

The dungeon had been conquered.

With the core destroyed, no more traps would be triggered.

No more bronze golems, no more monsters, and no more Guardian.

This place would just turn into the ruins of what once was a dungeon, with no more danger to be found.

If they were lucky, they might even find treasure while exploring the area.

Some adventurers specifically sought out conquered dungeons to find hidden treasures.

But for Sana, none of that mattered.

“So, in the end... what did I even do...?”

When people conquered a dungeon, they usually celebrated with applause.

Risking their lives to clear a dungeon—it brought a sense of accomplishment, even if there wasn’t any treasure.

But Sana felt no such sense of accomplishment.

When the trap was triggered, Lu had flown through the bars to retrieve the key. Ariel had taken care of the bronze golems and monsters.

And the Guardian? Whether it had fled or not, it wasn’t even there.

Lastly, the dungeon’s core, the most critical part of the dungeon conquest.

That was destroyed by the man.

“Aaah...”

With a hollow expression, Sana slumped to the ground.

In the end, Sana hadn’t done anything during the entire dungeon conquest.

Chapter 68 : Dungeon (10)

“Heuk... In the end, I couldn’t do anything...”

The feared situation had occurred.

Sana had collapsed to the ground, starting to sob.

The man scratched his head in exhaustion, while Lu quietly slipped into Ariel’s hat.

“...Hmm, sorry. I was just testing the magic on the dagger, but, well, a sword aura came out? I was surprised too. I didn’t mean to do it deliberately...”

As the man consoled Sana, Ariel walked into the room where the dungeon core was located.

The dungeon core, split in two, was dissipating into smoke, and behind it, a treasure chest was visible.

The fourth treasure chest.

It was clearly different from the others, fitting for the treasure chest found in the room with the dungeon core.

The chest appeared more luxurious, even emitting a white glow.

Click.

Ariel used telekinesis to open the treasure chest and lifted its contents.

It was a circlet.

A simple design with a blue gem embedded in the center.

It might be a magical artifact. There was an energy-like aura radiating from the circlet.

Ariel moved the circlet with telekinesis and placed it on Sana's head.

"Hu, huuk, I'm really useless... Huh?"

Sana blinked, touching her head in confusion.

"What's this... a circlet?"

"Wow, it looks great on you. It suits you perfectly! You look like a princess!"

The man quickly showered her with praise. In fact, the circlet did suit Sana remarkably well.

"And that circlet, it seems to be a magical artifact."

"But, mages don't rely on magical arti... huh?"

Sana's eyes widened.

"This is..."

Slowly, Sana stood up and began to draw upon her mana.

A blue shimmer surged and swirled around her.

"Ah..."

Sana was speechless.

Her expression was filled with awe.

"My mana... it's been amplified..."

The circlet had a mana amplification effect.

Unlike other magical artifacts that had specific spells cast on them, this circlet applied a magical effect to its wearer.

For an ordinary person, it wouldn't mean much.

Since an ordinary person has little mana, wearing this circlet wouldn't result in a significant mana amplification effect.

But for a mage like Sana, who had a large reserve of mana?

The effect was unimaginable.

Sana's current mana was about three times its usual amount.

"With this much mana... I can cast high-level spells... My skills can advance by one, no, three levels...!"

Sana forgot all about her tears and began to jump around in excitement.

"Wow! This is amazing! An incredible item! A circlet that amplifies mana! Even our tower master would covet this!"

"Hm, is it really that great?"

The man scratched his cheek. As an ordinary person, he couldn't grasp how significant the mana amplification effect was.

"It's incredible!"

Sana clenched her fists and shouted.

"My mana has tripled! This is every mage's dream come true!"

More mana meant the ability to cast higher-level spells.

Casting higher-level spells significantly improved one's understanding of magic.

In other words, increasing mana capacity alone could enhance magical abilities.

Of course, other talents had to complement it to some extent, but for Sana, that wasn't an issue.

Sana was the chief mage of the magic tower, after all.

What Sana needed was more mana capacity, and now that issue was

resolved, her abilities were bound to grow several levels.

“I’m glad you like it, but...”

The man glanced at Ariel.

It seemed Ariel had decided to give the circlet to Sana.

This meant the only thing Ariel had gained from the dungeon was the shiny necklace from the second treasure chest.

But that wasn’t a magical artifact. Though it would fetch a good price, it was just an ordinary treasure.

Considering Ariel had contributed the most to clearing the dungeon, it didn’t seem entirely fair.

“Hey... are you okay with this?”

The man approached Ariel and asked.

“You didn’t get a magical artifact....”

“It’s fine.”

Of course, Ariel didn’t need any magical artifacts.

A sword-aura-infused dagger, a Blink ring, or a mana-amplifying circlet—none of these were necessary for Ariel.

It was better to give such items to someone who truly needed them.

Besides, Ariel had already accomplished her purpose for entering the dungeon.

She had gained experience and memories.

That was enough.

Once the dungeon was cleared, an exit would appear.

They could leave through the exit opposite the entrance they came in.

Ariel's party emerged from the dungeon's exit.

There would likely still be a crowd gathered at the entrance, eager to ask them all sorts of questions.

How did you deal with the giant? What treasures did you get? What was the Guardian like?

Answering all those questions would be a hassle, and ignoring them wouldn't deter their persistence, so it was better to slip out quietly through the exit.

"Phew, it's finally over."

The man smiled in relief as they left the dungeon.

"Now I can breathe. Dungeons are always so gloomy. I never want to go in one again."

He lit a cigarette.

After all, there was no reason for him to enter a dungeon again. He planned to sell the magical artifact dagger and take a long break.

"Really?"

Sana smiled slightly as she adjusted the circlet.

"I'm going back into a dungeon."

"What? You're not returning to the tower?"

The man exhaled a puff of smoke.

"You're the chief mage of the tower, right? Don't you think it's time to return?"

"I can't go back like this."

Sana shook her head.

"I didn't accomplish anything in the dungeon. It would be embarrassing to return like this. Besides, now that I have the circlet,

I'm going to improve my skills. And for that, nothing beats real combat."

"I see."

The man nodded indifferently.

"Well, I won't stop you if that's what you want..."

"Of course, you're coming with me."

Sana's sudden statement made the man's eyes widen.

"Huh? Me? Why?"

"You destroyed the dungeon core. If you think about it, the reason I'm going back to the dungeon is because of you. Besides, I've realized I need protection. I don't think it's wise to go alone."

"Protection... do you really need that? You have the circlet now, and you're the chief mage of the tower..."

"I need protection! There might be opponents immune to magic, like that golem. In those cases, you'll have to step in."

The man looked at her in disbelief.

"Uh, didn't I tell you? I'm not an adventurer, I'm a merchant. What am I supposed to do, negotiate with a golem?"

"You can unleash sword aura."

Sana pointed at the dagger hanging on the man's waist.

"When I saw it earlier, it was a powerful sword aura. I hate to admit it, but it might be stronger than my magic."

"This, this is for sale. I'm not supposed to be using it."

"It's not too late to sell it after going into the dungeon with me. And you never know, we might find more treasure in the dungeon. You could get another magical artifact. It's a good deal for you too."

‘...If getting magical artifacts were that easy, people wouldn’t be paying huge sums for them, you clueless little girl.’

The man swallowed his thoughts and hung his head.

No matter what he said, Sana wouldn’t give up.

She would drag him into the dungeon one way or another.

From what the man had gathered over the years, Sana was the type who never gave up.

Even if she was beaten black and blue, she would stubbornly stick to her decisions.

“Fine, let’s go...”

The man spoke with a resigned expression.

After all, he was the one who had destroyed the dungeon core, so he felt a little guilty toward Sana.

‘Well... it wasn’t really my fault...’

More importantly, Sana had willingly given him the magical artifact dagger.

At this point, going into a dungeon together wasn’t a big deal.

If anyone else had offered a magical artifact in exchange for dungeon exploration, adventurers would’ve jumped at the chance.

“Great! Haha!”

Sana giggled, tapping the ground with her staff, then turned to Ariel.

While Sana and the man conversed, Ariel had been walking in the air using her telekinesis.

She had practiced little by little since they entered the dungeon, and now she was fully accustomed to it.

“Wow, sis, you look so natural. It’s like you’re walking on solid

ground.”

Lu clapped in admiration.

“Now you can fly freely anytime, even without my flight powder or Lakia.”

Sana watched Ariel with a look of disbelief.

Just as Lu said, Ariel was walking in the air so naturally, it was as if she were strolling on solid ground.

‘How... is that even possible...?’

Even with flight magic, walking that naturally would be impossible, let alone using telekinesis.

Telekinesis wasn’t designed to be used like that.

It was supposed to be for lifting light objects, not floating oneself and walking through the air.

To do something like that, one would need an absurd amount of mana.

Sana could probably imitate Ariel for a short while, but she wouldn’t be able to sustain it.

Her mana would be drained in minutes.

But Ariel had been doing this since they were in the dungeon.

Despite that, she showed no signs of strain and hadn’t even broken a sweat.

It was as if her mana was limitless, allowing her to keep walking in the air with a slight smile on her face.

“Ariel.”

Sana called out to Ariel.

“I’m planning to go back into the

dungeon. Ariel, what about you? Do you want to come along?"

Ariel slowly shook her head at Sana's question.

While the dungeon had been fun, she didn't feel like going back.

After all, she had to meet Ghost and wait for Lakia.

And since she'd already explored a dungeon, she wanted a new adventure.

Seeing Ariel shake her head, Sana looked disappointed.

"...Then I guess this is goodbye. Ariel, I really enjoyed meeting you."

Sana extended her hand, and Ariel descended from the air to shake it.

"I had fun too."

"Ariel, let's meet again next time. By then, I'll have improved even more, and I'll teach you more magic. You can look forward to it."

Sana smiled brightly, and Ariel responded with a small smile.

"Thank you."

"Goodbye, then. Take care, Ariel. Bye, Lu."

"Goodbye."

With that, Sana and the man left for a new dungeon, while Ariel and Lu remained behind.

Lu sat on Ariel's shoulder, swinging his legs.

"Hmm, sis, I guess it's time to find Ghost... oh, never mind."

Ahead of them, two wolves were running through the bushes.

It was Ghost and the black wolf.

Chapter 69 : Lizardman Kingdom

After completing the dungeon strategy and resuming her adventure, Ariel still hadn't decided on her next destination, so she decided to eat first.

There was a lake nearby, and since Ariel enjoyed eating by the lakeside, she headed straight there.

A short while later, she arrived at the lake and sat on a suitably wide and flat rock.

Ghost and the black wolf wagged their tails and approached Ariel, while Lu sneaked out from under her hat.

"Sister, it seems that Ghost and the black wolf became close while we were in the dungeon. More than expected."

What Lu meant by "more than expected" was that they had become lovers. Ghost was female, and the black wolf was male.

It was only natural for romantic feelings to bloom between males and females when they spent time together.

The way the two wolves looked at each other was far more intense than before, and the quick-witted fairy couldn't help but notice.

However, Ariel remained completely oblivious.

She was simply happy that Ghost had made a friend.

"Anyway, don't you think we should name the black wolf soon? It seems like he'll be staying with us."

At Lu's words, Ariel nodded.

In fact, she had already named the black wolf when she first saw him.

Pointing at the black wolf, Ariel spoke.

“Black.”

Lu gave a slightly awkward smile, and the black wolf, now called Black, looked somewhat flustered.

After a brief silence, Lu opened his mouth.

“Hmm... It’s a very straightforward name, Black.”

Ariel laughed and nodded. It seemed she had chosen the name quite well.

Ghost and Black.

An adventure with the two wolves.

In any case, it was time to eat.

Ariel pulled out a bunch of raw meat from her inventory and gave it to Ghost and Black, while handing Lu some potato stew and fruit wine.

As for herself, Ariel ate rye bread and milk.

A peaceful meal by the quiet lakeside.

Ariel loved this moment.

She enjoyed the exciting experiences that came with adventuring, but spending quiet, peaceful moments like this was a happiness she couldn’t miss.

After the meal, Lu, having gotten tipsy from the fruit wine, drifted off to sleep, and Ghost and Black, after glancing at Ariel, quietly disappeared into the bushes.

Ariel approached the lake and gazed at the water’s surface. She had become curious during the meal.

Could she use telekinesis underwater?

Lifting a fish swimming underwater with telekinesis seemed entirely possible.

But what if she moved using telekinesis without swimming herself?

The resistance of the water would probably make it difficult, but there was no way to know without trying.

Ariel took a step forward to enter the water. Just then, a voice came from the side.

“Oh-ho, a beautiful elf lady.”

Ariel turned her head to look at the speaker.

Smooth head and snake-like skin.

A lizardman was approaching Ariel.

“My name is Draco.”

The lizardman introduced himself without hesitation and then asked for Ariel’s name.

“If it’s not rude, may I know your name?”

“Ariel.”

“Ariel... What a lovely name, as beautiful as you are. I’ll remember it.”

Draco adjusted his clothes with a gentle smile.

He was dressed like a nobleman, but to Ariel, it didn’t seem to suit him at all.

Lizardmen, after all, looked better when their upper bodies were bare, and they carried tridents or similar weapons.

“...The lake is always so beautiful,” Draco said, gazing at the lake with a distant look.

“Of course, it pales in comparison to your beauty. Hahaha.”

Ariel ignored Draco’s words and turned her gaze back to the lake.

She continued her previous train of thought.

If she could use telekinesis underwater, would it be possible to move like a submarine?

Meanwhile, as Ariel was lost in thought, Draco fell into his own musings.

Draco was from a nearby lizardman kingdom.

In fact, he was a prince.

Barring any unforeseen events, he would soon become king and lead the lizardman kingdom.

Naturally, he would need a queen. His bride had already been decided.

She was the daughter of the most outstanding general in the lizardman kingdom.

She would be Draco’s queen.

But Draco was not pleased. He didn’t want her as his queen.

It wasn’t that she was lacking.

She was renowned as one of the most beautiful lizardwomen, and her martial skills were exceptional.

Any other lizardman would have been overjoyed to marry such a top-tier bride.

‘But not me...’

Draco didn’t want her.

More precisely, he didn’t want a marriage arranged purely because he was a prince and she was the general’s daughter.

What Draco wanted was a marriage born of passionate love.

He had tried to fall in love with her at first.

But he failed.

Being with her didn't make his heart race, nor did it make him happy.

She felt the same. She didn't love Draco, nor did she want the marriage.

Still, the two of them would marry in the end.

The king had decreed it. And the king's word was absolute.

There was only one way to change this situation.

Draco had to find another bride.

If Draco found someone he loved, and someone fit to be queen, the king might reconsider.

And so, Draco left the kingdom.

To find his bride.

And now, he had found the perfect match.

Ariel.

Her appearance was exactly to Draco's liking.

Her shimmering silver hair and sorrowful red eyes.

She was indeed as beautiful as one would expect from an elf.

Draco felt he had finally met someone who made his heart race. He desperately wanted Ariel as his queen.

Most of all, he was drawn to the fact that she was an elf.

Elves were not only beautiful but also a noble race.

If Draco could marry an elf, he would become the envy of all lizardmen.

The king would surely be delighted as well.

‘Hmm, but what about children? Would they be hybrids?’

A hybrid of a lizardman and an elf.

He had never heard of such a thing.

But it didn’t matter.

Draco and Ariel would simply be the first.

A love that transcended race.

It was something Draco had always dreamed of, and now it was finally within reach.

He just had to extend his hand and grab it.

Draco carefully pulled out a ring he had hidden in his pocket.

It was a ring made of woven grass, with a small flower attached to it.

Although it wasn’t adorned with shiny jewels, this was far more romantic—at least, Draco thought so.

‘After all, elves are a race that loves nature and has no greed...’

Draco gently stroked the grass ring and looked up at Ariel.

Ariel was still staring at the lake. Her beautiful profile made Draco’s cheeks flush red.

“Um, excuse me...”

Draco awkwardly spoke up.

Ariel turned her head and looked at him.

“Although we just met...”

Draco knelt on one knee.

“Will you accept this ring...?”

His voice trembled as if there was an earthquake.

In truth, this wasn't how Draco had imagined proposing.

He had envisioned a much more romantic and impressive proposal.

He had even practiced by himself a few times and was somewhat confident.

But now that the moment had come, Draco couldn't be as suave as he had hoped.

Just meeting Ariel's gaze made him feel like he was going to stop breathing.

Ariel silently stared at the grass ring Draco held out.

Her face remained expressionless.

Draco's heart was pounding desperately.

‘Please, please, accept it!’

That was his inner thought, but he didn't say it out loud.

After all, Draco was still a prince and a gentleman.

Ariel slowly reached out and took the ring.

“!!”

Fireworks exploded in Draco's mind.

‘At last... my beloved bride... and an elf, no less...!’

Smiling faintly, Ariel tried the grass ring on her finger.

Draco felt as if he were dreaming. It was hard to believe this was real.

“Huff, huff, huff.”

Even his breathing became labored. Draco struggled to catch his breath as he stood up.

“Well, then, I suppose we need to get into the water now...”

There were two ways lizardmen proposed.

The first was, like with any other race, offering a ring.

The second was to enter the water and share their love.

“Would it be alright to join me in the water...?”

At Draco’s question, Ariel nodded immediately.

“Sure.”

“!!”

Draco’s eyes widened, and he took another deep breath. If he didn’t, he felt like his heart might burst.

“Huff, huff... huff...”

Watching Draco struggle, Ariel tilted her head in confusion.

Was this lizardman sick or something?

“Are you okay?”

Ariel approached and placed her hand on Draco’s forehead.

Since they were of different heights, she had to stand on tiptoe a bit, but she managed to reach.

Draco’s smooth, round forehead was burning hot. His breathing was ragged, and his eyes kept darting back and forth.

“You’re running a fever.”

Just as Ariel said that—

Plop.

Draco's legs gave out, and he collapsed on the spot.

Chapter 70 : Lizardman Kingdom (2)

“Wh-what kind of a disgrace am I...?”

Draco quickly tried to stand up.

After going through all the trouble of proposing, he'd fallen to his knees, his legs giving out.

No lizardman could embarrass himself more than this.

He had to get up immediately, scoop Ariel into his arms, and dive into the water.

That's what a tough lizardman would do.

“Haa... haa...”

With trembling legs, Draco struggled to his feet.

He looked at Ariel, the one who would soon be his bride.

“Th-then, can we enter the water now...?”

As he mumbled his question, Ariel shook her head firmly.

“No.”

To Ariel, Draco seemed to be in a lot of pain.

His face was completely flushed, and he was shaking all over.

Entering the water like this would be dangerous.

Ariel asked him gently, “Where's your home?”

“M-my home...? Well, it’s in the nearby Lizardman Kingdom, of course... where I planned to... share... o-our nest... Haa... Haa!”

Draco’s face reddened again as he took a deep breath.

Ariel felt that this was no good.

The lizardman was in a serious condition.

There was even a chance he was ill.

“Let’s go home.”

Ariel took Draco’s hand, intending to take him back home.

“!!”

At that moment, Draco’s eyes widened.

For the first time in his life, he was holding hands with a woman.

Small and delicate, her hand seemed as if it would break if he held it too tightly.

But it was soft and warm.

‘F-feels good...’

Draco smiled blissfully, and then fell backward, losing consciousness.

When Lu, who had passed out from too much wine, woke up, a large blue barrier surrounded them.

Inside the blue barrier, Ghost and Black were entangled together, and Ariel was sleeping with Lu lying on her stomach.

“Hmm, looks like sis fell asleep right after eating again...”

Lu stretched and got up.

Then he noticed someone lying beside Ariel.

“Huh?”

Lu rubbed his eyes and looked at the figure.

There, next to Ariel, lay an unconscious lizardman.

Dressed in a fancy outfit as if to show some formality.

“What’s with this lizard guy?”

Lu glanced at Ghost and Black, but they seemed just as clueless.

“...Sis?”

With no other choice, Lu gently patted Ariel’s cheek.

“I think you should wake up for a bit. There’s some lizard guy inside your barrier.”

Ariel slowly opened her eyes.

Lu pointed at the lizardman.

“Take a look at him. Somehow, he managed to get in here. Maybe we should deal with him.”

“...It’s Draco.”

“Draco? Do you know him?”

“Yes.”

Lu looked at Ghost and Black once more.

What in the world had happened while he was asleep that made Ariel know a lizardman?

But Ghost and Black were equally clueless.

It seemed Ariel and the lizardman must’ve gone somewhere together while Lu was sleeping.

“So, how did you come to know this lizardman?”

In response to Lu’s question, Ariel briefly explained the situation.

She had been standing by the lakeside when a lizardman approached her to introduce himself, and then he had suddenly collapsed and lost consciousness.

Because she kept it brief, Ariel didn't mention the part where she received a grass ring or their talk about going into the water together.

Had she mentioned those details, the fairy Lu would certainly have figured it out—that Draco had proposed to Ariel.

And if he had realized that, instead of making a healing powder as Ariel suggested, Lu would have kicked Draco's face, exclaiming, "How dare a lizard like him propose to my sister?"

But Lu thought Draco had merely introduced himself, which, while slightly annoying, wasn't too much of a concern. So, he made some healing powder and sprinkled it on Draco.

"Hmm."

But even so, Draco didn't wake up.

This meant he hadn't lost consciousness due to physical injuries.

If the healing powder didn't wake him, he must've suffered a mental shock, or he might have a rare illness resistant to the powder.

Although Draco was affected by the former, Ariel and Lu believed it to be the latter.

"Let's take him home."

Saying this, Ariel dispelled the shield she had set up around them.

Lu glanced at Draco once again.

"But, we don't know where his home is."

"It seems to be nearby."

After Draco lost consciousness, Ariel had flown high up using her

telekinesis, searching for the Lizardman Kingdom he'd mentioned.

Draco had said it was close by, and sure enough, there was a place shrouded in dense mist with a swamp surrounding it, which seemed to match.

She had planned to take him back right away, but feeling drowsy after her meal, Ariel had quickly set up a shield and fallen asleep.

"Hmm. Let's take him, then. It shouldn't be too difficult."

Lu crossed his arms as he spoke.

"But we probably won't be allowed inside the Lizardman Kingdom. They're very cautious around other races and rarely allow outsiders into their kingdom."

Despite what he said, this was an unusual situation.

The lizardman they were taking back was the prince of the Lizardman Kingdom.

The king of the Lizardman Kingdom, Lugerico, was astonished.

He'd just heard the most absurd news.

This morning, Draco had left a letter saying he was off on a journey to find his dreams, only to return unconscious just a few hours later.

"What should we do...?"

A guard asked.

"Should we let the elf and the wolves into the kingdom?"

Lugerico nodded.

"Hmm, we have no choice. Bring them in."

"Understood."

The Lizardmen were a very reclusive race.

They were often despised by other races due to their appearance, and they'd suffered persecution for generations.

So, they'd built their own kingdom and banned outsiders.

Allowing others in would mean enduring disgust even within their own kingdom.

To prevent that, the Lizardman Kingdom barred entry to anyone who wasn't a lizardman.

But now, the king, Lugerico, had no choice but to permit outsiders to enter.

They had brought Draco back, after all.

According to reports, Draco was floating in the air, likely due to elven magic.

What's more, the elf seemed very young and was traveling with a fairy and two wolves.

Until the reason for Draco's unconsciousness was discovered, Lugerico decided to keep a close watch on the elf and her companions.

If they had harmed Draco, there would be no forgiveness.

Draco was a prince of the Lizardman Kingdom.

Harming the kingdom's prince required due punishment.

Conversely, if they had brought Draco to help, they would be thanked and treated as honored guests.

They couldn't turn away those who had helped the prince.

"Hmm."

Lugerico sat on his throne, waiting quietly. Soon, word came that the elf and Draco had arrived at the palace.

Lugerico ordered his guard.

“Take the prince to a room for treatment. We must find out precisely why he lost consciousness. As for the elf and her companions, I’ll meet them personally.”

“Understood.”

Contrary to Lu’s expectation, Ariel and her party were allowed into the Lizardman Kingdom without trouble.

Not only that, but Draco, whom Ariel had levitated, turned out to be the prince, so they were guided directly to the palace.

“Hmm, I thought he looked fancy, but to think he’s a prince. Why was a prince wandering alone by a lake...?”

Mumbling as he followed the guard, Lu glanced around the Lizardman Kingdom, taking in the sights.

A place they would normally be barred from entering.

But thanks to Draco’s status as a prince, Ariel was keen to make the most of this rare opportunity to explore.

From the outside, the kingdom was surrounded by mist and swampland, but within, it was clear and open, with flat ground that felt like a regular forest.

The air was slightly humid but refreshing, filled with the scent of the forest.

Along the path to the palace, they passed small lakes and ponds, where lizardmen could often be seen swimming—mainly younger ones.

Lizardmen loved water and, as children, were reluctant to leave it.

Noticing Ariel’s group, the young lizardmen, driven by curiosity, began trailing after them.

Most kept a respectful distance, but some came quite close.

Pitter-patter.

A young lizardman ran up, blocking Ariel's path.

Lacking hair but wearing a yellow ribbon on its head, it seemed to be a girl.

She was shorter than Ariel, tilting her head to look up at her.

"Hey! Back off! Don't bother my sister."

Lu waved his hand dismissively, but the young lizardman ignored him, blinking her big round eyes as she gazed at Ariel.

Ariel looked back at her, then took a piece of cake from her inventory, levitating it toward the child.

"Woah?"

The young lizardman flinched at the floating cake, but then, captivated, she sniffed it and took a small lick.

Finding it to her taste, she began gobbling it up eagerly, and other young lizardmen flocked to Ariel.

"Me too, please!"

"Stop pushing!"

"Ow, who stepped on my tail?!"

Luckily, Ariel had plenty of cake in her inventory to go around.

The young lizardmen crowded around, and she gave each one a piece.

Chapter 71 : Lizardman Kingdom (3)

Ariel found the young Lizardmen quite adorable.

Their appearance, a mix of lizard and human, resembled little dinosaurs.

The little dinosaur-like Lizardmen gathered around Ariel, eagerly munching on cake.

She had wondered if Lizardmen would even enjoy sweet cake, but seeing them devour it so hungrily, it seemed they did.

In truth, Ariel didn't know that Lizardmen naturally loved sweet things; sweet fruits were even a staple in their diet.

The young Lizardmen were so absorbed in eating cake that they didn't even notice Ariel poking them gently on the nose with her finger.

After a while, the young Lizardmen, having finished the cake, looked up at Ariel with glittering eyes.

It was clear they wanted more.

Ariel wiped the cake cream from one young Lizardman's mouth and stood up.

Although there was still plenty of cake in her inventory, giving them more might upset their stomachs.

No matter how delicious it was, overeating could be harmful.

Besides, they were on their way to the palace.

She couldn't spend all her time with the young Lizardmen here.

"See you next time."

With those words, Ariel turned and followed the soldier guiding her back to the palace.

At the entrance to the Lizardmen palace stood a massive statue.

It was enormous and golden, reminding Ariel of Lakia.

As Ariel paused to gaze quietly at the dragon statue, the soldier guiding her approached and spoke.

"Our Lizardmen revere dragons. That's why we place statues like this throughout the kingdom. Don't elves also worship the World Tree?"

Ariel nodded absentmindedly.

She thought that might be part of the lore, but there was no one she genuinely revered.

"The statue looks real."

Ariel muttered.

Lakia, in her dragon form, looked exactly like this.

Well, maybe a little younger than this statue, but still quite similar.

"It's the work of dwarves," the Lizardman soldier said.

"This statue is modeled after Lord Elysion. You could say it's nearly identical to the real thing."

"Elysion?"

"Lord Elysion is the guardian dragon who protects our Lizardman kingdom. She resides in the northern Kryn Frost Mountains and once drove out the demon race that invaded our kingdom. Since then, we have worshipped her as our guardian dragon. Without her, we might have perished at the hands of the demon race."

Hearing the soldier's words, Ariel nodded slightly.

Then Lu whispered into Ariel's ear.

"Sis, doesn't this statue look like Lakia? Based on my strong intuition, I'd say this dragon called ElySION might be Lakia's mother. I'm almost certain! Remember how I correctly predicted that the street kid Shion would become a hero? Just like that – a very strong hunch."

Ariel narrowed her eyes.

Listening to Lu's words, it seemed plausible.

She had never met her, but if she imagined Lakia's mother, she might look something like this statue.

"Sis, if ElySION is Lakia's mother, then Lakia might be at the Kryn Frost Mountains in the north. She did say she was going to see her mother. But if she hasn't returned yet, something might have happened. How about we go check it out?"

Lu said, feeling a shift within himself.

In the past, he wouldn't have dared to suggest visiting a dragon's lair.

Ordinarily, no one, not even the king of Lizardmen, would dare enter a dragon's lair without permission.

Yet now, he was asking Ariel as casually as one would suggest visiting a friend's house.

This was surely a change that had come from traveling with Ariel.

Lu trusted Ariel. With her by his side, he felt certain they'd be safe, even in a dragon's lair.

"Alright, let's go."

Ariel agreed.

Just as Lu longed to see Lakia, Ariel too wanted to see her.

She was eager to dress Lakia up in a bunny costume and hug her

while sleeping.

But for now, she decided to explore the Lizardmen kingdom since she was already there.

After all, Lakia was a dragon.

Dragons were the most powerful beings on earth.

Even if something happened, it wouldn't endanger Lakia's life.

There were few beings on the continent who could threaten a dragon's life.

There was no need to rush.

They had plenty of time to explore the Lizardmen kingdom.

Ariel resumed walking with the soldier and soon entered the palace.

"From here, the prince will be in my care."

At the soldier's words, Ariel gently lowered Draco to the ground.

Draco had been floating in mid-air by telekinesis the whole way, and since it was quite comfortable, he hadn't woken up yet.

Not only had he not woken up, but he was even snoring a little, clearly enjoying a good sleep.

The guiding soldier took Draco and disappeared somewhere, and soon, another soldier approached Ariel, bowing respectfully.

"I will escort you to the audience chamber. His Majesty awaits."

Thus, Ariel and her companions were led to the king's audience chamber.

"Hmm."

King Lugerico, the Lizardman king, observed Ariel's group quietly as they entered the chamber.

A young elf with silver hair, a silver wolf, a black wolf, and a fairy.

It was quite an unusual combination.

‘Impressive.’

Lugerico felt a slight tension as he looked at Ghost and Black.

The size of the two wolves was considerable.

They were calm now, but if they were to cause a disturbance, it would be quite troublesome.

Containing them would require significant effort.

Lugerico spoke up.

“...First of all, I’d like to express my gratitude. Thank you for bringing my son, Draco, here safely.”

Despite the king’s words, Ariel’s group didn’t have any particular reaction.

Ariel was busy looking around, and Lu only nodded slightly.

Ghost and Black were grooming each other.

“Hmm, but could you explain why Draco is unconscious? That’s quite an important matter.”

“Oh, as for that, he suddenly collapsed on his own.”

Lu replied.

“Even after I sprinkled healing powder, he didn’t wake up. Could it be that the prince has some illness?”

Lugerico shook his head.

“There’s no illness. Just yesterday, Draco was in perfect health... Do you have any idea why he suddenly collapsed?”

“I wasn’t there to see it directly, but according to my sister, he just

suddenly fell over. His forehead was also quite hot. Could it be a fever?"

"Well... we'll find out through treatment. Regardless, I am deeply grateful. If it weren't for you, Draco might have been in danger."

Lugerico looked at Ariel again.

By now, Ariel had stopped looking around and was meeting Lugerico's gaze.

Her gaze was unafraid and steady.

'Can they be trusted?'

Lugerico pondered.

In truth, he found it hard to believe the fairy's words. Fairies were known for being deceptive.

But elves were different.

Elves were known to be truthful, to a fault.

Moreover, Lugerico had already received a report.

On her way to the palace, Ariel had shared cake with Lizardman children.

Most other races looked at Lizardmen with disgust, yet this elf had shown kindness.

That made Lugerico feel favorable toward her.

'They can be trusted.'

Lugerico decided.

Until Draco awakened, he would treat this elf and her companions as honored guests.

"I will prepare a private room for you. You may stay in the palace for as long as you wish. I'll also assign an attendant, so if you need

anything, please ask. You are the saviors of Draco, after all.”

Ariel nodded.

“Thank you.”

Her young face bore a calm expression.

As Ariel bowed, Lu, startled, hurriedly bowed as well, and the wolves, fidgeting in the back, lowered their heads.

Seeing this, Lugerico could tell just how much the fairy and the wolves respected this elf.

“Now, I will escort you to your private room. Please follow me.”

A soldier then guided Ariel’s group out of the audience chamber, and Lugerico smiled quietly.

It was the first time other races had been invited into the Lizardman kingdom, and it didn’t feel so bad.

‘Maybe it’s time to consider allowing more visits from other races...’

Lugerico thought as he settled back onto his throne.

Most other races held disdain for the Lizardmen, but not all were the same.

There were elves like Ariel who showed kindness.

It might not be a bad idea to befriend such elves.

Just as Lugerico was pondering this, a soldier rushed in.

“Sire, we have an emergency!”

“What is it?”

“The elf... she’s currently swimming in the Monarch Lake!”

“What? In the Monarch Lake?!”

“Yes, indeed! We considered pulling her out, but since you ordered us to treat her as an honored guest for saving Draco...”

“I must go immediately.”

Lugerico rose to his feet.

The Monarch Lake was the most sacred and forbidden place within the palace.

Only the king was allowed to bathe in its waters; no one else could approach it.

It symbolized the king’s authority.

For an outsider to be swimming in such a place...

Lugerico hurried to Monarch Lake, and his expression was one of utter disbelief.

The usually calm Monarch Lake was churning with turbulent waves.

Swoosh!

Chapter 72 : Lizardman Kingdom (4)

The royal palace's guest suite, where Ariel and her party were led, was more luxurious than expected.

An antique carpet covered the entire floor, and an elegant chandelier hung from the ceiling, with hundreds of crystals emitting a mysterious glow.

Beyond the high, arched windows, the lush greenery of the Lizardman Kingdom was visible in a single glance.

The leaves, bathed in sunlight, shimmered with a vibrant glow, swaying gently.

“Oh, this is better than I thought, sister.”

Lu fluttered over to the marble bathtub prepared in one corner of the room.

On the table next to the tub, a golden goblet and a basket of fruit were laid out.

Lu peeked inside the goblet and then began rummaging through the fruit basket.

Ariel tiptoed across the antique carpet.

It was as soft as walking on clouds.

She hopped and threw herself onto the bed in the center of the room.

The bed was enormous, perhaps king-sized.

A cushioned sensation enveloped her entire body.

Ariel rolled around on the bed.

She thought there could be no greater happiness than being able to sleep on such a spacious and soft bed.

In her heart, she wished she could stash this bed in her inventory and use it when camping outdoors.

However, she knew it would surely be noticed if something as large as a bed suddenly disappeared.

Even if she didn't get caught, it would still be considered theft.

She had no intention of resorting to theft just to obtain a bed.

Ariel bounced up from the bed.

Ghost and Black were already settled by the sunlit window, while Lu fluttered over, holding a bright red apple.

"Sister, this apple looks incredibly sweet. Try it."

Ariel took a bite of the apple Lu offered.

Crunch.

The fresh juice filled her mouth, and Ariel shivered slightly at the sweet taste that enveloped her tongue.

This apple tasted as delicious as any dessert.

Holding the apple in her hand, Ariel stepped outside the guest suite.

"Where are you going, sister?"

Lu quickly perched on her shoulder.

Walking down the palace's grand corridor, Ariel replied, "I'm going for a swim."

"A swim? But there's a bathtub in the suite big enough for you and the wolves."

“It needs to be much bigger than that.”

What Ariel wanted was to swim—or rather, she wanted to test if she could move through the water using telekinesis without moving her body.

Step by step.

As she walked through the palace corridor, she encountered several Lizardman soldiers.

However, it seemed they had been instructed beforehand, as they only bowed respectfully without stopping her.

Ariel exited the palace and looked around.

Since Lizardmen enjoyed water, lakes and streams could be found throughout the kingdom.

Surely there must be one within the palace grounds.

“Oh...!”

At that moment, Lu fluttered off somewhere. It was a garden filled with colorful flowers in full bloom.

“How... beautiful...”

Lu rubbed against the flowers, burying his face in them as if he were intoxicated.

Indeed, Lu was a fairy.

While fairies loved alcohol, they also adored flowers.

“Don’t tempt me so much... You’re making it hard for me to resist...”

Lu murmured, as if entranced.

Ariel also entered the garden.

A breeze carried the scent of roses, filling the air.

The garden felt almost dreamlike, as if standing on the boundary between reality and a fairy tale.

Ariel began to stroll through the garden.

With each step, the garden grew deeper, and soon she found what she had been searching for.

At the edge of the garden, a lake appeared.

The lake was as calm as a mirror.

Without a ripple, the surrounding trees, flowers, and blue sky reflected perfectly on its surface.

Water lilies blooming by the shore painted a serene picture alongside the lake.

The tranquility over the water made her instinctively hold her breath.

For other Lizardmen, this might be a place of awe where they felt one with nature, but for Ariel, it didn't hold such reverence.

Without hesitation, she leapt into the lake.

Splash!

Her body disappeared beneath the lake's surface, and the calm water stirred.

Circular ripples spread widely around her.

The lake was deeper than expected.

Ariel sank to the lakebed and activated her telekinesis.

Slowly, her body began to move.

She could feel the water's resistance, yet she could use telekinesis even underwater.

A small smile appeared on Ariel's face as she rose above the water.

Splash!

The still lake became lively.

Ariel dove in and out of the water like a playful whale.

Then she submerged herself again, spinning around like a top.

Whoosh!

The faster she spun, the more the water sprayed.

The Lizardman king, Lugerico, arrived at the lake just then.

With his mouth agape, he watched Ariel frolic in the lake.

“W-What on earth...”

Watching her spinning and slicing through the water.

How was such a thing even possible?

Lizardmen prided themselves on their swimming skills, but none of them had ever swum like Ariel.

The idea of that swimming style seemed almost impossible.

It was as if she was one with the water, gracefully and mystically spinning.

The Lizardman soldiers beside him snapped out of their trance and asked the king,

“Shall we pull that elf out immediately?”

This place, known as Monarch Lake, was reserved for the king alone.

No one else was ever allowed to step foot in it.

And yet, here was an elf girl splashing around as if it were her own backyard—a serious matter indeed.

“No, it’s fine... You may all leave.”

But Lugerico dismissed his soldiers.

He could tell that Ariel had no idea it was a royal lake and that she wasn't trespassing on purpose.

There was no need to blame her, and seeing her swimming so joyfully made him reluctant to stop her.

Instead, Lugerico found himself feeling a bit excited.

His tail swished against the ground in anticipation.

Tap, tap, tap.

He felt an urge to jump in himself.

He hadn't swum in the Monarch Lake since his youth.

After his queen passed away, being alone in the lake brought on feelings of sadness and loneliness.

'That's why I kept my distance from swimming all this time...'

But watching Ariel's lively swim made his heart race.

In the end, Lugerico began to remove his clothing.

He was ready to join her in the lake.

Normally, Lizardmen didn't wear clothes, but they had started due to prejudice from other races.

Since Ariel was from another race, Lugerico kept his undergarments on, out of respect.

Standing by the lake in his undergarments, he took a deep breath.

It felt like returning to his younger days.

"Ah."

At that moment, Ariel poked her head out of the water and looked at him.

“Mr. Lizard. Going for a swim?”

‘Mr. Lizard...?’

Lugerico couldn’t help but laugh.

Calling a Lizardman a “lizard” was typically forbidden, and for most, it would be grounds for aggression.

But there was no malice in Ariel’s tone, so he wasn’t offended.

Thus, he laughed.

‘To be fair, I am a lizard. And at this point, I’m more like a grandpa than an uncle.’

He felt oddly complimented to be called “uncle.”

With a playful smile, he asked Ariel, “Would you like to race with me?”

“Sure.”

And soon after, “Huff... huff...”

Lugerico was left panting, wearing an exhausted expression.

He had lost the swimming race against Ariel.

“You’re like a water sprite. I never expected an elf to swim this fast!”

He knew elves were good at climbing trees, but not that they could swim so well.

Lugerico had raced Ariel three times and lost every time.

She had even defeated him with a simple stroke, rather than her earlier spinning technique.

Ariel’s stroke was somewhat clumsy, but her speed in the water was unmatched.

Lugerico grinned at her.

Though he lost the race, his face beamed with joy.

It had been exhilarating and refreshing to swim with such vigor after so long.

“Could you keep this race a secret? I’d be a little embarrassed if word got out that I lost. After all, I am the king. Haha!”

Laughing heartily, he slapped the water with his large hand, and Ariel nodded with a smile.

“I’ll keep it a secret.”

Chapter 73 : Lizardman Kingdom (5)

“Gasp!”

Draco’s eyes shot open.

He saw the familiar pattern on the ceiling above him.

‘This place...’

Looking around, he found himself in a luxurious room, lying on his bed.

He distinctly remembered setting out from the kingdom to find a bride, yet here he was, back in his own room.

‘What happened...?’

Slowly, Draco tried to recall his memories. At that moment, an image of a girl surfaced in his mind.

An elven girl with a beautiful face.

‘Ariel!’

Draco, who had embarked on a journey to find true love, had reached a lakeside not long after leaving the kingdom.

It was there he met Ariel, and at first sight, he was smitten.

He offered her a ring made of grass and proposed to her.

She accepted with a bright smile, nodding her head. Ariel had accepted his proposal.

Not only that, she even agreed when he invited her to enter the water together.

But Draco, nervous as he was, started to lose his breath, and at that moment, Ariel tenderly touched his forehead, asking if he was okay.

The gentle touch of her hand still lingered faintly on his forehead.

Draco's legs weakened, and he collapsed on the spot.

Just as he managed to stand up again, Ariel held his hand.

That was the last thing he remembered.

The moment he held Ariel's hand, Draco lost consciousness and fainted.

To think he, a man, would faint just from holding a hand — it was utterly embarrassing.

Draco felt his face grow warm.

'No... that's not what's important right now.'

But he quickly shook his head.

What mattered now was how he had returned to the kingdom and the whereabouts of Ariel.

"Is anyone there?"

At Draco's shout, the door creaked open, and a Lizardman stepped in.

"Ah, Lizania."

It was Lizania, Draco's younger sister, who wasn't even five years old yet.

"Brother Draco, help me pick a ribbon. Which one is prettier, this one or this one?"

In Lizania's webbed hands were a red ribbon and a blue ribbon.

Since Lizardmen didn't have hair, the females often adorned their heads with ribbons. Draco found it somewhat pointless.

"Uh, the blue ribbon is prettier."

"Really? I thought so too! Here, tie it for me."

"Uh, okay."

Draco tied the blue ribbon in Lizania's hair and asked,

"Lizania, do you know how I returned to the palace?"

"The elf and some wolves brought you back. They floated you through the air."

"Floated through the air...? And where is that elf now?"

"She just left the palace."

"Is that so?"

Draco stood up.

The ribbon he tied for Lizania was a bit loose, but it didn't really matter.

Meeting Ariel was more urgent now.

He planned to explain everything to her.

That he hadn't fainted out of embarrassment; he was just feeling a bit unwell.

And he had to finish what he hadn't managed to do earlier — entering the water together with her.

'This might be for the best. It would be fitting to go to Monarch Lake, after all.'

Monarch Lake.

It was the lake where the king would take his queen. In simple terms,

it was the place where the Lizardman king shared his love.

Draco was probably created there as well.

Since Ariel had accepted his proposal and would become the queen of the Lizardmen, entering Monarch Lake would be ideal.

The thought of going into the water with Ariel made Draco's heart race once again.

But he forced himself to stay calm as he walked.

"Oh, Brother."

Just then, Lizania called from behind.

"That elf went into Monarch Lake with Father."

"?!"

Draco's steps halted.

"W-What did you say...?"

"The elf went into Monarch Lake with Father. It's unfair I'm not allowed in there, even though I want to swim there too."

Lizania pouted.

To others, her expression might be hard to read, but Draco recognized her displeasure.

But more than that...

"M-Monarch Lake... Ariel and Father...? Why...?"

Draco felt as though he'd been struck by a rock.

As mentioned before, entering Monarch Lake implied a significant meaning.

"Wait... Are you sure? Lizania, are you certain?"

Draco grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

Lizania's round eyes widened at his rough handling.

“Waaaah! Brother is bullying me!”

Lizania burst into tears.

Usually, Draco would comfort her, as she was still a young girl, his somewhat adorable little sister, even if others saw her as just a lizard.

But now, he had no capacity to calm her down.

“Lizania! If you're lying, you'll get in trouble! I'll smack you with my tail! So, tell me the truth! Did Ariel really go into Monarch Lake with Father?!”

“Y-Yes, she did, really. Brother Draco, you're scaring me.”

Lizania pushed Draco away and quickly dashed out of the room.

Draco slumped onto the bed, overcome with despair.

‘No... It can't be... Father wouldn't do that. Ariel is my bride. Besides, the age difference between Father and Ariel...’

True love transcends race and age.

That was Draco's firm belief.

That was why he was able to propose to Ariel without hesitation.

After all, age didn't matter when it came to love.

But imagining Father and Ariel in Monarch Lake... it just felt wrong.

...

Above all, the one who should be entering Monarch Lake with Ariel was not his father, but himself.

Ariel was his bride.

“Pfft.”

Draco let out a laugh.

The whole thing seemed absurd.

Father had never forgotten Mother.

Though it had been a long time since she passed, Father still cherished her memory.

The reason he never even glanced at Monarch Lake was because he still loved Mother.

Draco had learned about true love from watching his father and aspired to love only one woman for his entire life, just as his father did.

Creak.

The door opened again, and someone entered.

A Lizardman with a stately build and a crown on his head.

It was Draco's father, Lugerico.

“Ah, Father.”

Draco quickly rose.

Lugerico looked as dignified as ever.

But his forehead seemed a bit damp. There was an unusual smile on his lips, familiar yet subtly different from his usual expression.

A sense of foreboding crept over Draco.

“So, you've woken up.”

“Yes, Father.”

“I heard you lost consciousness at the lakeside?”

“Yes, I... wasn’t feeling well... I apologize...”

“It’s fine. These things happen. Some elf brought you back.”

“Are you referring to Ariel?”

Draco replied, his voice turning cold without realizing it. The foreboding in his heart gradually shifted into anger. Anger toward his father.

‘No. It’s not confirmed yet. Calm down.’

After all, it was just Lizania’s words, a child not even five years old.

She might have been mistaken, or perhaps even lying. He needed to hear it directly.

“Father, may I ask...”

Draco looked at Lugerico with fierce eyes.

“Did you enter Monarch Lake with the elf who brought me here?”

Lugerico stared back at him, his dignified face twitching slightly before breaking into a bright smile.

“Yes, I did. She’s a very cute and lovely child. Haha!”

Draco felt dizzy.

“F-Father!”

“I feel so refreshed!”

I never thought I’d have an experience like this at my age. It’s as if I’m young again. How invigorating! Haha!”

Something within Draco shattered.

Could this really be real? Not a dream?

It was a horrifying and wretched reality that left his heart in despair.

Draco couldn't believe it. He didn't want to believe it.

But this was indeed reality.

His father had admitted it. He had taken the woman his son loved most.

And he laughed proudly as if it were nothing. As if he had done nothing wrong.

It made sense.

Luggerico, his father, was the king of this kingdom.

The king could do as he pleased.

'This is the power of authority...'

A crushing sense of helplessness weighed on his heart.

Draco staggered out of the room.

"Where are you going, Draco?"

His father called out behind him, but Draco couldn't bring himself to turn around.

If he looked back now, he'd break down in tears and confront his father.

Demanding why he had taken his woman, insisting that Ariel was his, throwing a childish fit.

If Draco had been more rational, he might have realized that he hadn't told anyone about his proposal to Ariel.

But now, rational thought was beyond him.

Draco kept walking, eventually leaving the palace.

His mind was a jumble, and he had no desire to sort it out.

The image of his father and Ariel entering Monarch Lake together

replayed in his mind.

‘Such a cute and lovely child. Haha!’

His father’s cheerful voice echoed in his ears.

Not only that, but the sight of his father’s bright smile and the moisture on his forehead burned Draco’s heart black.

Draco, wandering aimlessly, soon arrived at a lakeside.

A lake near the palace, used by the kingdom’s citizens.

Lizardmen were gathered there, joyfully playing and laughing together.

“Wow, throw me in! Throw me into the lake! Kyah!”

“Me too, me too! Throw me even farther this time! Kyah!”

Draco smirked.

Though he felt so utterly crushed, they were all having a grand time.

“Sigh.”

A small sigh escaped Draco’s lips. He felt overwhelmed, unsure how to move forward in life.

‘I suppose I should give up on finding a bride. I don’t want to love anyone anymore...’

Draco was about to turn away. In his current state, he didn’t even want to be near the lake.

He couldn’t handle their happy energy.

“...?!”

But just as he was about to leave, a girl caught his eye.

Glittering silver hair, pointed ears, a beautiful face.

“Ah.”

It was none other than Ariel.

Chapter 74 : Lizardman Kingdom (6)

After finishing her swimming competition with Lugerico, Ariel decided to take a quiet walk outside the palace on her own.

Lu was in the garden, sipping fruit wine and talking to the flowers, while Ghost and Black had fallen asleep, leaning on each other in a separate room.

Once outside the palace, a main road stretched out before her, lined on both sides with various shops.

Looking at the weapon shops, clothing stores, restaurants, and other stores lined up, Ariel thought that the environment where the Lizardmen lived wasn't very different from that of humans.

The Lizardmen were freely roaming the streets, enjoying the simple pleasures of everyday life.

Each was dressed in unique attire, with extravagant ribbons on their heads or long, flowing tail decorations standing out.

In the market, lively shouts from Lizardman vendors filled the air, and a mouth-watering smell wafted from stalls overflowing with fruits, meat, fish, and herbs.

Ariel strolled slowly through the marketplace.

Then noticing her, the Lizardmen started murmuring among themselves.

“Is that the elf? The one who helped Prince Draco and gave out cake to the children...?”

“She’s really pretty. Should I go say hi?”

“No, what if she finds it unpleasant? They say other races are disgusted by Lizardmen.”

Despite the growing attention, Ariel continued walking quietly, not paying it much mind since she’d experienced this a few times in human villages as well.

After passing through the marketplace, she came upon a large lake.

In the center of the lake stood a grand dragon statue, with clear water flowing refreshingly from its mouth.

And, as before, young Lizardmen were laughing and swimming in the lake.

“Oh! It’s the elf sister!”

“Sis!”

A few young Lizardmen greeted Ariel.

“Thanks for the cake earlier!”

“Do you have more by any chance?”

“Sis, swim with us!”

These were the young Lizardmen to whom she had given cakes on her way to the palace.

The young Lizardmen ran up to Ariel, pulling on her arms with their tiny hands.

“Do you like water, sister?”

“Come play with us!”

“I’m good,” Ariel said, shaking her head.

“I’ve already been swimming.”

“Oh.”

“Let go of her arm, silly! She already said she’s been swimming.”

“You let go first.”

Still the young Lizardmen wouldn’t leave Ariel’s side.

Feeling slightly annoyed Ariel asked them, “Would you like me to do something fun?”

“What kind of fun?”

“Yes, please!”

“Sounds exciting!”

The young Lizardmen’s tails wagged in excitement.

Using telekinesis, Ariel lifted the young Lizardmen into the air.

“Huh?”

“What’s going on? I’m flying!”

“Wow!”

She then gently moved them over the lake and dropped them, making sure they wouldn’t get hurt.

“Ahh!”

The young Lizardmen burst into laughter as they fell into the water.

They quickly got out and ran back to Ariel.

“Do it again! Do it again!”

“Me too! Throw me farther!”

“Throw me really high!”

Ariel indulged their requests.

With each wave of her hand, the young Lizardmen soared through the air splashing into the lake, only to pop back out and ask to be thrown even farther.

“Haha!”

“This is so fun!”

The joyful laughter of the young Lizardmen echoed around the lakeside as they splashed in the water.

“Do it again, do it farther!”

Ariel’s telekinesis magic seemed endless, as her mana was boundless, allowing her to use it without tiring.

With just a simple gesture, the young Lizardmen were soaring into the sky, only to plunge into the lake again.

If another magician had seen this, they wouldn’t have been able to close their mouth in astonishment.

“Using telekinesis like this? So recklessly and wastefully? Isn’t she going to run out of mana?”

However, the Lizardmen had little knowledge of magic and found the display purely marvelous and fun, with no reason to question it.

“Um, Ariel...”

At that moment, someone shyly approached and spoke to her.

Ariel turned her head slightly, and there stood a tall Lizardman.

She recognized him immediately.

Although it was hard to tell with his lizard face, judging by his attire, this was the Lizardman prince she had met at the lakeside earlier.

“Drakan?”

“...My name is Draco.”

“Draco.”

“Anyway, thank you... for bringing me to the kingdom after I fainted... It seems you brought me here using this very magic.”

Draco commented while watching Ariel’s telekinesis.

His younger sister Lizania had mentioned that he had floated through the air when he was brought, and now he realized it was an apt description.

Even now, young Lizardmen were floating in the air, flying towards the lake.

Draco stood in front of Ariel, his mouth opening and closing in hesitation.

He wanted to explain why he fainted, wanted to ask her questions, but his lips trembled, and no words came out.

In fact, when he saw Ariel playing with the young Lizardmen earlier, he felt an urge to run away.

He didn’t know what to think or how to act towards her.

But he decided to be brave.

Running away wouldn’t change anything.

Just as he had questioned his father directly, he decided to ask Ariel directly too.

Why she chose his father instead of him, whether it was because he fainted, if it was a result of his father’s authority as king, or because she genuinely wanted it... He had a lot to ask.

But standing in front of her, his mind went blank.

Ariel’s clear eyes, like a lake, stared at him intently, and as she tilted her head slightly, Draco felt his heart race once more.

His face flushed and sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Are you okay?”

Startled, Draco stammered in response.

“I-I’m fine. Normally, I’m not weak, but I think I overexerted myself lately, which affected my condition... I usually exercise a lot and am very healthy...”

Draco’s voice trailed off, embarrassed and feeling an intense sense of self-reproach.

Was this really an explanation? He wanted to hide somewhere.

‘Am I such a pathetic man?’

But he couldn’t hide.

He had to face this head-on.

This moment might be the most important one in his life.

“Ariel, I have something to ask...”

Draco opened his mouth again.

“I heard that you entered Monarch Lake with my father... is that true?”

“It’s true.”

Ariel answered so simply.

Draco felt his heart ache again, but he couldn’t back down now.

“Did you go because you wanted to? Or... did my father force you?”

“I went because I wanted to.”

“Oh...”

Draco felt his vision blur.

More than Ariel’s answer, what struck him was that the leaf ring he

once gave her was no longer on her finger.

It was something she lost while spinning in the lake, but Draco thought she had discarded it.

With this, he felt he'd received her answer.

"Sniff!"

A tear trickled down Draco's cheek.

Seeing this, Ariel looked puzzled and reached out, intending to wipe away his tears with her sleeve.

"I'm fine..."

Draco quickly stepped back, shaking his head.

He didn't want Ariel to console him, as he felt it would only make him feel more miserable.

Looking at Ariel with tear-filled eyes, Draco spoke.

"Ariel, just one last question..."

"Yes?"

"Did you... enjoy your time with my father in Monarch Lake?"

"Well..."

A smile slowly spread across Ariel's lips.

"That's a secret."

Ariel spent the day eagerly exploring the Lizardman Kingdom.

She took Ghost and Black out, letting the young Lizardmen ride on their backs, and even flew through the sky with Draco's sister, Lizania, using her telekinesis.

That night, the king held a grand festival near the lake, illuminated with bright lights and a swimming competition.

There Ariel demonstrated her spinning swimming technique.

Her rapid, spinning movement through the water captivated many Lizardmen.

The young Lizardmen tried to mimic her, spinning in the water but soon sank, unable to move forward.

“This is super hard!”

“You can’t do it. Only the elf sister can.”

Anyway, everyone laughed and enjoyed the festival.

For some reason, Draco was nowhere to be seen, but since he always had his quirks, no one thought much of it.

The next morning, Ariel and her companions departed the Lizardman Kingdom, heading towards the Crin Frost Mountains in the north.

Crin Frost was the lair of a dragon named ElySION.

ElySION was suspected to be Lakia’s mother, so perhaps they might meet Lakia there.

Meanwhile, even after Ariel left, Draco hadn’t taken a single step out of his room.

He had locked himself in and spent the day crying, getting angry, regretting, and feeling despair.

Finally, he pulled himself together and got out of bed.

He walked out of his room and met his father, Lugerico.

“Oh, Draco, are you feeling better?”

Lugerico greeted Draco warmly, with Lizania sitting on his knee while he tied her ribbon.

It was a genuinely radiant smile, one Draco hadn’t seen since his mother’s passing.

‘He hasn’t smiled like that since mother...’

Draco choked up, but he had already steeled himself.

“I came because I have something to say, Father.”

“Go ahead.”

Noticing Draco’s serious expression, Lugerico sent Lizania back to her room.

“Go play in your room, my dear.”

“Yes.”

After Lizania left, Lugerico looked back at Draco.

“Say what’s on your mind.”

“I’ll be blunt. I’ll marry Lady Giana.”

“General Anorico’s daughter?” Giana?

“Yes.”

“For so long you resisted, but now you’ve come to your senses.”
Lugerico chuckled heartily.

“You’ve made a good decision. General Anorico is a strong and brave Lizardman, and his daughter, Giana, has no flaws. She is excellent in martial arts and, for a Lizardman, exceptionally beautiful, isn’t she?”

‘And yet, Father, you went for a cute elf...!’ Draco bit his lip and nodded.

“Lady Giana and I don’t love each other yet, but I heard that you and mother didn’t have feelings for each other initially, either. It was a political marriage, yet you eventually fell in love. If I’m lucky, maybe Giana and I will end up like that too.”

“Yes, yes, you’ve truly grown. How admirable...”

“And...”

Draco interrupted Lugerico's words.

"I met Ariel yesterday and confirmed it myself. Your relationship with her is indeed sincere, so I've decided to give up willingly. I lost, and you won. So, I acknowledge my defeat. Please make her happy. I'll treat her as a mother, though it won't be easy... I'll accept it as the fate of a loser."

Having said his piece, Draco turned and walked away.

Tears dripped down his cheeks.

"That's all I have to say. I'll be going now."

"Wait."

Lugerico approached and placed a hand on Draco's shoulder.

"Draco."

"Yes, Father?"

Lugerico asked, looking perplexed.

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

"I already know everything. If you plan to deny it..."

"She's left."

"What?"

Chapter 75 : Dragon Lair (1)

Leaving the Lizardman Kingdom, Ariel and her party soon arrived at the Kryn Frost Mountain Range.

The mountain range stretched majestically toward the sky.

Snow-covered peaks sparkled in the sunlight.

Ariel took a deep breath, feeling the cold wind against her face.

The crisp air seeped deep into her lungs.

The Kryn Frost Mountain Range was an extremely cold place, and snow was even falling.

“Brr, it’s so cold, sis...!”

From inside Ariel’s hat, Lu shivered and spoke.

Thanks to her limitless stamina stat, Ariel wasn’t affected by the cold, and Ghost and Black, being spirit creatures, didn’t seem bothered by it either.

Only Lu felt the chill.

As a fairy species that lived in warm climates, it was natural for her to feel cold.

Lu’s wings trembled as he burrowed deeper into Ariel’s hat.

“H-how much longer until we arrive, sis...?”

“We’re almost there.”

In the distance, between the mountain peaks, a large entrance appeared.

Unlike the snowy, icy landscape, the entrance glimmered with a golden hue.

That was likely the rare of Elysion.

Ariel continued moving forward.

The closer they got to the entrance, the more they felt a faint flow of mana.

And as they reached the entrance, they saw a blue light surrounding it.

The blue light intertwined, forming a complex pattern, and Ariel sensed that it was a barrier protecting the rare.

Ghost attempted to approach the barrier and touch it with his nose.

“No.”

Ariel quickly stopped Ghost.

Beside her, Black shook off the snow that had accumulated on his body with a whine.

“It seems to be a barrier spell, sis.”

Lu, peeking out from under Ariel’s hat, remarked.

The barrier moved slowly as if it were alive, emitting a luminous glow.

The light was cold and beautiful, yet exuded an imposing aura.

Ariel reached out and touched the barrier.

Crackle!

A tingling sensation ran through her hand.

It was a powerful electric-type magic, but it didn’t harm Ariel.

If Elysion, who had set the barrier, saw this, they would likely look

shocked.

The barrier was an advanced electric spell strong enough to kill even a troll in one hit.

But Ariel casually reached her hand through the barrier.

Crackle! Crackle!

The barrier shook violently, as if warning the intruder.

But it didn't break.

In fact, the barrier's magic intensified.

Crackle-crackle-crack!!

Ariel furrowed her brows.

It seemed she would have to use a bit of force to break through the barrier.

But breaking someone else's barrier would be rude.

She withdrew her hand, and at that moment, someone appeared from inside the barrier.

"What's going on! Who dares to brazenly touch the dragon's barrier?!"

It was a dwarf with a golden beard, stomping over furiously.

"I'll teach you a lesson... Huh?!"

The dwarf stopped abruptly upon seeing Ariel.

"Hello."

Ariel greeted him warmly.

She didn't remember his name, but she was sure he was Lakia's brother.

Seeing him here reassured her that she had come to the right place.

Lakia was probably here too.

“You, you...!”

The dwarf stammered as he looked at Ariel.

“How did you get here...?!”

“I’m here to see Lakia.”

Ariel responded calmly.

The dwarf scowled.

“Go back. Lakia is busy right now.”

He turned on his heel.

Ariel quickly reached through the barrier and grabbed the dwarf’s arm.

Crackle!

“...? The barrier... Why are you...?”

The dwarf looked at Ariel in disbelief.

The barrier’s magic was responding, yet Ariel’s expression remained unchanged, as indifferent as ever.

“Ugh!”

The dwarf tried to pull his arm free, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Let go!”

He struggled, and then Ariel released him.

He stumbled and fell, almost like a boulder rolling down.

“Haa.”

The dwarf on the ground sighed, glaring at Ariel.

An elf who was immune to dragon fear and absurdly strong.

It seemed she wouldn't leave easily.

He wanted to unleash high-level magic to chase her away but held back.

'I'll let it go this once...'

Lyonel, Lakia's brother, brushed off his clothes and stood up.

Then he dispelled the barrier, allowing Ariel and her companions into the rare.

Warm air flowed within the rare.

"Ah, now I can live."

Lu flew out from Ariel's hat and fluttered around.

"So, this is the dragon's rare."

The rare was shaped like a giant cave.

The walls shimmered with gold, casting a golden glow.

Following Lyonel, they walked down a narrow passageway.

Soon, a spacious area appeared, where Lakia sat with her eyes closed.

A smile spread across Ariel's face.

Seeing Lakia again filled her with joy.

And Lu and Ghost felt the same way.

"Lakia!"

Lu flew over and clung to Lakia's face, and Ghost rushed to lick her hand.

Lakia opened her eyes.

“Lu...? Ghost...?”

Lakia blinked, then spotted Ariel.

“Ariel!”

A smile blossomed on Lakia’s face.

“How did you get here?”

“We came to see you because you weren’t coming to see us!”

Lu answered, and Ariel nodded in agreement.

“You came all this way to see me...?”

Lakia looked touched.

Ariel approached Lakia and patted her head.

“Have you been well?”

“Well... Mother suddenly collapsed...”

At Lakia’s words, Ariel’s gaze shifted.

Lying there was a woman with golden hair and a beautiful face, her ears pointed like an elf.

It was Lakia’s mother, Elysion.

Black spots marred her face, and a green barrier surrounded her.

“Those black spots...”

Lu muttered, looking at Elysion’s face.

“It’s a curse...”

“Yes.”

Lyonel nodded beside her.

“She was struck by black magic.”

Lyonel clenched his fist in frustration.

“There’s no way to break that black magic. For now, all Lakia and I can do is maintain this barrier to keep it from spreading further.”

The reason Lakia hadn’t visited Ariel was clear.

Lakia was maintaining the barrier to prevent the black magic from spreading in her mother’s body.

Saying he needed to replenish his mana, Lyonel disappeared, leaving only Ariel and her group with Lakia.

“Ariel, who’s this black wolf? I’ve never seen it before.”

Lakia asked, looking at Black.

“Is it a new companion?”

“Yes.”

Ariel replied, petting Black.

“His name is Black.”

“Oh, his fur looks so soft. If it weren’t for maintaining the barrier, I’d love to pet him too.”

“Lakia...”

Lu gently rubbed Lakia’s cheek.

“Is there really no way to break the black magic?”

“No...”

Lakia nodded helplessly.

“My brother has scoured ancient texts, but it seems impossible. The

black magic was cast by 'Baalberith,' a lieutenant of the Demon King's army. In the past, Mother protected the Lizardman Kingdom from the demon army, and in retaliation, Baalberith cast this curse with his life. The curse has remained in her body, only recently surfacing."

"Hm."

Lu scratched her forehead.

Indeed, a curse cast by a lieutenant of the Demon King's army as a last resort wouldn't be easy to break.

But Lu thought there might still be a way.

Rumor had it that there was a being who could break even curses cast by the Demon King himself.

"Who would that be?"

"The Saint."

Lu spoke with a serious expression.

"If the human Saint were here, she could surely break this black magic."

The Saint was a special being born with divine blessings.

She possessed a sacred power beyond magic, and her act of healing was called a "miracle."

"The Saint's miracles can break all curses and purify any contamination. If we bring her here, this black magic can be dispelled in no time."

Lakia's face lit up with hope at Lu's words.

"I need to tell my brother right away!"

Lakia tried to stand up.

"Ah."

But she stopped.

She couldn't leave, as she was maintaining the barrier.

"...I'll bring her."

Ariel said, moving in the direction Lyonel had gone.

Lyonel, meanwhile, was soaking in a hot spring, eyes closed.

The hot water melted away his fatigue, relaxing his entire body.

This hot spring was a place Lyonel had created himself.

With a mana-recovery magic circle inscribed on the floor, it was a magical hot spring that allowed him to recover mana while soaking in the hot water.

If he had to pick his favorite place in his mother's rare, Lyonel would choose this spot without hesitation.

That's how much he loved this hot spring.

Even now, as his mana was depleted from maintaining his mother's barrier, he made it a daily habit to come here to recover.

'What should I do...'

Lyonel pondered.

He had scoured every book he could find to break the black magic plaguing his mother, but no solution had emerged.

Continuing the barrier rotation with Lakia was tiring, and his mother hadn't regained consciousness.

'I have to find a way to break that black magic... Hmm, maybe I should seek help from other races? Perhaps elves or humans might know something. Even if they are lesser beings...'

Lyonel slowly opened his eyes.

'Yes, maybe I should ask other races...?'

And suddenly, he found himself staring directly at Ariel, who was watching him intently.

“Wha—!”

Lyonel shrieked and stumbled backward.

Had he been too deep in thought?

He hadn’t noticed Ariel’s approach at all.

And, well...

“Get out! I’m taking a bath right now!”

Lyonel’s face flushed red. He was currently naked.

It was strange for a dragon to feel embarrassed about being naked.

Dragons didn’t usually wear clothes and took pride in their golden scales.

Lakia herself never felt the need for clothes and enjoyed bathing with Ariel, but Lyonel was different.

Since childhood, Lyonel had been a bit sensitive, feeling uncomfortable showing his naked body to others.

“Get out! Right now! Or I’ll use magic! I really mean it this time!”

Seeing Lyonel flustered, Ariel gave a slight smile.

“Sorry. I’ll wait outside.”

She swiftly walked out of the hot spring.

“.....”

Left alone, Lyonel felt on the verge of tears from the strange humiliation.

“What... What is with that elf, really...”

Chapter 76 : Dragon Lair (2)

Due to Ariel's sudden appearance, Lionel, no longer in the mood to leisurely enjoy his hot spring bath, quickly washed himself and stepped outside.

Clomp, clomp.

As Lionel walked through the tunnel-like cave, a faintly white figure suddenly blocked his path.

“Huh?”

Lionel stopped in his tracks and glared ahead.

“How dare you block a dragon's path? If you don't move immediately, I'll make you regret it.”

What blocked Lionel's way was a large rabbit. It wasn't a living rabbit; it was merely a fluffy-looking stuffed bunny.

Lionel assumed Ariel was the one inside the bunny suit.

Not content with barging into the hot spring earlier, she was now trying to tease him by wearing a bunny costume.

The bunny held out its stubby arm toward Lionel, as if asking for a handshake.

“Childish.”

Lionel said coldly and brushed aside the bunny's arm, only for it to flop to the side. Lionel was taken aback.

He'd barely touched it, yet it collapsed so pathetically? And he hadn't even hit it that hard.

To top it off, the bunny slumped its head as if it had fainted.

“Stop playing around.”

Lionel spoke, his voice slightly uneasy.

“I know you’re pretending. Get up now.”

But the bunny didn’t budge.

“Oh, really.”

In the end, Lionel grabbed its body to lift it up.

“Get up this insta—”

Just then, the bunny’s head fell off with a thud.

“Gah!”

Lionel gasped and dropped to his knees in shock.

The bunny head rolled across the floor, hitting the wall with a soft thud.

His face turned pale.

The head just fell off out of nowhere—what on earth...

“Huh?”

Just then, Lionel noticed the inside of the bunny’s head was completely empty.

Clomp, clomp.

Someone approached from the side.

Turning his head, Lionel saw Ariel standing there, watching him quietly.

“What... You were there the whole time? Then, who is this bunny...?”

Lionel looked down at the stuffed bunny still in his arms.

He thought Ariel had been inside it, but apparently not.

Then how did the bunny move around on its own and even offer a handshake?

“Telekinesis.”

Ariel said softly. Lionel’s face gradually flushed.

“Damn it...”

Telling the bunny to move, then trying to lift it when it fell, only to get spooked when its head came off...

“Wanna try it on?”

Ariel asked, her voice teasing. Lionel scrunched his face.

“Why would I wear something like this? I’m a dragon! There’s no way I’d wear such a ridiculous animal suit! Take it away, now!”

Lionel handed the bunny body he was holding over to Ariel.

The bunny, as if on cue, began to move on its own again, walking toward the wall.

It then picked up its head, placing it back on its body, merging back together as if it were alive.

‘To use telekinesis so naturally...’

Lionel thought to himself, impressed.

It even looked kind of fun.

He felt he should practice it himself when Ariel wasn’t around.

“By the way, why did you barge into the hot spring earlier?”

Lionel crossed his arms, glaring at Ariel.

"It's strange, you know? Normally, if someone is bathing, you wait outside, right? Isn't that the polite thing to do?"

"I'm sorry."

Ariel apologized again, her voice calm and unaffected.

But an apology was an apology, so Lionel decided to let it go.

"I'll let it slide this time. But next time, you'd better be prepared."

"Okay."

Ariel hung her head, looking a bit dejected.

Lionel felt a twinge of guilt.

This elf had come all the way to check on Lakia and even took good care of her.

Had he been too harsh?

A dragon's anger could be intimidating, especially to a young elf.

'Well... it's not like she had any ill intentions entering the hot spring. And she left right away too...'

Lionel shuffled awkwardly toward Ariel.

"Ahem, there's no need to look so... Wait, you're smiling!"

Now that he looked, Ariel was struggling to suppress a smile.

She had lowered her head to hide it.

"You! Really! You're...! What kind of elf are you?!"

Lionel was speechless, astonished. Ariel raised her head.

"Hey, I think there's a way to heal your mother."

"What? Are you trying to mess with me again? If you're joking about this—"

“A saintess.”

“Huh?”

Lionel blinked.

“A saintess...? A saintess... Oh!”

Lionel clapped his hands together.

“My mother told me that human saintesses are beings blessed by the gods! Yes, if we bring a human saintess, she might be able to dispel that dark magic. Why didn’t I think of this before?”

A bright smile spread across Lionel’s face. He’d finally found a way to cure his mother of the dark magic.

“Thank you!”

Before he knew it, he’d wrapped Ariel in a tight hug, completely forgetting she’d been teasing him.

“Thank you so much! Now we’re saved!”

Ariel gently patted Lionel’s broad back.

The dwarf beard near his neck tickled her, but it wasn’t unpleasant.

Hand in hand, Ariel and Lionel set off back to where Lakia was waiting, with the telekinetically controlled bunny trailing behind them.

Returning to their previous location, they saw Ghost and Black lying on either side of Lakia, resting their heads on her lap with their eyes peacefully closed.

Meanwhile, Lu sat on Lakia’s shoulder, chatting away. She listened intently, her eyes sparkling as Lu recounted their dungeon adventures and their visit to the Lizardman Kingdom.

Each time Lu mentioned something Ariel had done, Lakia interjected with, “Wow, Ariel, that’s amazing!”

“Lakia.”

Lionel called out to her with a smile.

“You heard, didn’t you? About the way to heal Mother.”

“Yeah. If we bring a human saintess, it might work.”

“But... how should we bring her here?”

And so, they began discussing their plan.

The saintess was likely residing in the Great Cathedral of the Imperial Capital.

Being nearly as important as the hero, she’d be heavily guarded.

The Great Cathedral was surrounded by powerful magical barriers, and hundreds of elite knights guarded her day and night.

The saintess was someone even harder to meet than the emperor, which was only natural.

She was a miracle worker and the first target for the Demon King’s army.

Could they bring such a figure here?

“I’ll go.”

Lakia declared confidently.

“I’ll go and bring the saintess here myself, even if it means turning the empire to ashes...”

“No, wait, Lakia, that’s not happening.”

Lionel hurriedly interjected.

“Mother wouldn’t approve. And it’s forbidden for dragons to interfere in the affairs of other races.”

Dragons couldn’t involve themselves in other races’ affairs unless

they were personally threatened.

This rule was set by the Dragon Lord to maintain world balance.

Without it, other races might have been wiped out by dragons long ago.

Dragons were the strongest beings on the surface, after all.

Their interference could disrupt the balance, as it had when a human kingdom was reduced to ashes in a single day.

Of course, if the Demon King's army threatened the continent's peace, or if another race went insane and attacked a dragon, they were allowed to intervene.

But turning the capital to ashes just to bring back a saintess?

"No way, the Dragon Lord would be furious. Mother too..."

"Hmm..."

Fortunately, Lakia knew enough to accept this easily.

"So, what now? Should we ask the humans? Since it's a dragon matter, they might listen. Actually, they *should* listen. Those inferior beings!"

"Calm down."

Lionel soothed her.

"Yes, a peaceful approach would be best. It might be a blow to our pride, but there's no choice. But the bigger issue is that it would take more than a day to reach the capital, and you and I must maintain Mother's barrier."

"Yeah..."

"Ah..."

"We can't go. The moment the barrier breaks, Mother would be in danger."

Lakia's face darkened.

Now that she thought about it, she realized that without the barrier, the dark magic would spread through Mother's body, and they'd never be able to reverse it.

Right now, they had to take turns keeping the barrier in place.

"I'll go."

Ariel, who had been fiddling with the bunny, spoke quietly.

"You just need me to bring the saintess, right?"

Chapter 77 : Imperial Capital (1)

Ariel eventually decided to bring the saintess from the imperial capital.

This was because Lakia and Lionel had to maintain the barrier and couldn't leave their positions.

Besides, Ariel's goal was adventure.

This was a perfect opportunity to explore the imperial capital, although she would need to return as soon as possible since time was of the essence.

"Thank you, Ariel," Lionel said.

"Helping out even though it's not your responsibility... I think I misunderstood you a bit. I disliked you earlier, but now I see that you're actually kind. No wonder Lakia respects you as a mentor."

Ariel gave a small smile and approached Lionel.

She was about to ask if she could touch his beard to show gratitude when Lakia spoke up.

"Brother, how about giving Ariel a teleportation scroll?"

"Oh, that's a great idea. She'll have no choice but to travel there normally, but she can just tear the scroll upon her return and arrive back here instantly."

With a grunt, Lionel walked over to the wall.

There was a large drawer there, and as he opened it, it revealed a clutter of items.

Ariel moved closer as Lionel began rummaging through the items.

“Let’s see, there should be a teleportation scroll Mother made somewhere in here...”

At that moment, Ariel spotted a sword amidst the objects.

She lifted it with telekinesis.

She did this because she thought Lionel might hurt himself, like cutting his hand, while searching through the drawer.

“Ah! Don’t touch that sword!” Lionel shouted and snatched it away.

Everyone turned to look at him, surprised by his abrupt reaction.

He hastily hid the sword behind his back.

“T-This is... something that mustn’t be touched...”

“Oh, that sword, it’s been a while, hasn’t it, Brother?” Lakia said.

“You made it yourself, saying you wanted to create a legendary weapon on par with the Hero’s Sword...”

“Quiet!” Lionel yelled.

Lu opened his mouth quietly.

“If it’s on par with the Hero’s Sword, isn’t that a divine weapon? Can a sword like that really be made?”

“I don’t know. Brother once said he wanted to become a dwarf craftsman and made the weapon himself. What did he say back then? Something about a dwarf craftsman who forges his destiny with unyielding resolve...”

“Lakia!”

Lionel stomped over to Lakia, causing the sword hidden behind his back to fall to the ground.

“Stop talking!”

Lionel covered Lakia’s mouth with his large hand, his face turning

beet red.

Ariel lifted the sword from the ground with telekinesis and inspected it closely.

It was crude and poorly made, nothing like the craftsmanship of a dwarf.

A smile crept across Ariel's lips.

Not only had Lionel polymorphed into a dwarf, but he'd even made a sword himself.

She could sense his love for dwarves.

In that moment, Ariel felt a connection with Lionel, and as a result, she found herself quite fond of the sword.

"Hah, why do these things keep happening..." Lionel muttered as he walked over after quieting Lakia.

Then he saw Ariel smiling as she examined the sword he had made.

"...Alright, go ahead and laugh. It's a lousy sword, isn't it? But I gave it my all when I made it. It may not look like much to others, but I put my heart and soul into crafting it. Now, give it back."

Lionel extended his hand, but Ariel didn't return the sword.

Instead, she looked up at him and asked quietly.

"Can I keep it?"

"What...? You want to keep my sword? Why?"

"It's a wonderful sword."

"..."

Lionel was momentarily speechless.

But he soon gave her a doubtful look.

“You really think my sword is wonderful?”

“Yes.”

“But Mother and Lakia think it’s just scrap metal. Do you still want it?”

“Yes.”

“Well then... fine. If you want it, it’s yours. After all, I’ll owe you for helping with the saintess, so consider it my thanks.”

“Thank you.”

Ariel hugged the sword closely.

Lionel, feeling pleased, burst into hearty laughter.

“Hahaha! Recognizing the value of my sword... you have a good eye. You’re truly a remarkable elf! At last, my sword has found its master. Let me tell you the name of the sword.”

Lionel spoke with a serious face.

“The sword’s name is Ragnarok. It holds the meaning of bringing about the end of the world. It’s a fearsome sword with destructive power. Do you see the mana stone on the hilt? Place your hand on it.”

Following Lionel’s instructions, Ariel did so.

The sword glowed a deep red, like blood.

“Ooh!” Lu exclaimed.

“That’s amazing! What is that light?”

Lakia sighed softly beside him.

“It’s just light. It doesn’t have any abilities. It’s purely decorative.”

“...”

Lionel flinched slightly but looked at Ariel again with a serious expression.

“When that red light shines from Ragnarok, it’s meant to unleash world-ending power. So, be cautious when using it. Don’t take it lightly.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Ariel removed her hand from the mana stone at the hilt.

The red light vanished, and Ragnarok returned to being a crude sword.

“Haha...”

Lionel let out a dark laugh.

“I’m looking forward to seeing what Ragnarok can do from now on. It’s going to shake up the continent...”

“Brother, did you find the teleportation scroll?”

“Oh, right.”

Lionel started rummaging through the drawer again.

Ragnarok was quite large on Ariel, so she would have to carry it on her back rather than her waist.

After securing Ragnarok in its scabbard on her back, Ariel turned to face everyone.

“Then, I’ll be off.”

She had memorized the location of the imperial capital from the map.

Planning to fly there quickly with telekinesis, she intended to leave behind Ghost, Black, and Lu.

“Be careful. And if anyone bothers you, you know what to do, right? Just draw Ragnarok immediately.”

Lionel, the dwarf with golden whiskers, said. Ariel nodded with a smile.

“Thank you so much, Ariel. Please be safe,” Lakia said politely.

“And thank you for this necklace. I absolutely love it.”

A sparkling necklace hung around Lakia’s neck.

It was a piece Ariel had brought from a dungeon for her, and thankfully, Lakia seemed pleased with it.

“Sister... even if you miss me, don’t cry,” Lu added.

“Don’t sleep just anywhere, don’t get into fights, and if anyone offers you food...”

“Got it.”

Ariel extended her hand, ruffling Lu’s hair vigorously.

She then patted Lakia’s head, stroked Ghost and Black’s chins, and, for good measure, brushed her hand over Lionel’s beard before turning around.

As she exited the lair with light steps, a chilly breeze brushed Ariel’s cheek.

Her silver hair fluttered in the wind, reflecting dazzling light.

Ariel lifted her gaze toward the direction of the imperial capital.

Then, she pushed off the ground with a spirited jump.

The imperial capital, surrounded by towering walls.

Beyond the walls, high towers and the imperial palace could be seen.

And at the heart of the city lay the grand cathedral where the saintess resided.

After confirming the capital from the sky, Ariel descended to the ground.

While she would've liked to fly directly to the cathedral, the imperial capital was protected by a magic barrier that prevented air travel.

This was to ward off any invasions from the demon army.

Ariel decided to pass through the gates instead of meddling with the barrier.

She had no intention of causing unnecessary trouble.

The gate to the capital exuded a majestic presence.

Tall marble pillars adorned each side, and soldiers with imposing physiques guarded the entrance, watching everyone with stern expressions.

A line of people extended before the gate.

There were nobles in splendid attire, merchants laden with heavy goods, and travelers with curious faces, all from various walks of life.

Ariel quietly joined the line.

"Hey, it's an elf."

"Carrying a sword on their back... are they an adventurer?"

"But they look too young. Maybe they're a slave?"

People around her whispered, glancing at Ariel, but she stood straight, looking only ahead.

In her mind, she was thinking of desserts.

Her purpose was to bring back the saintess, but since she was in the imperial capital, she wanted to try the best dessert in the city.

"Hey, kid."

Someone tapped her shoulder from behind.

"What's an elf doing in a human city? Shouldn't you be in a forest somewhere?"

The tone was mocking.

“And what’s with that sword on your back? Can you even wield it? Hahaha.”

“Trying to play adventurer, are we? But that sword’s too shabby. Did you pick it up from some blacksmith’s trash?”

“Hey, don’t ignore us. It might be a legendary sword with frightening power for all we know. Hahaha!”

“Yeah, right,” Ariel thought, simply watching them in silence.

They were mercenaries, all of them towering and rugged.

Their muscular arms, weathered skin, and scarred faces showed signs of many battles.

“Hey, kid, how about this?” one of the mercenaries said with a sneer.

“Let’s have a duel. If you’re a real adventurer, you won’t back down, right? Whoever loses will become the other’s subordinate and do whatever they say. How about it? As a brave adventurer, an honorable elf, will you accept my challenge?”

Chapter 78 : Imperial Capital (2)

The mercenary who challenged Ariel to a duel was named Belmont.

Belmont was a seasoned warrior who started his mercenary life in his youth, gaining experience through countless battlefields.

His weapon was a hefty double-edged sword, whimsically named “Spin Breaker,” a name he’d coined himself.

Although no one else used the name, Belmont would always address his sword before battle, saying, “Take care of me, Spin Breaker.”

Once, a fellow mercenary asked him, “Do you like your sword more than any woman?”

With a solemn expression, Belmont replied, “Spin Breaker.”

Since then, Belmont was seen as a bit of an eccentric, even a sword enthusiast, among his comrades.

However, no one could dismiss his skill.

As mentioned before, Belmont was a seasoned warrior who honed his skills through many battlefields.

His swordsmanship was a well-balanced blend of strength, speed, and technique, with a special move called the “Triple Spin Slash.”

This technique involved rapidly spinning and slashing unpredictably at the upper, middle, or lower sections of his opponent.

Facing this technique for the first time, opponents often failed to respond, losing heads or legs, unable to predict where the next blow would land—even Belmont didn’t know where his next strike would go, as he wielded his sword on a whim.

Even if an opponent managed to block an attack, the heavy weight of Spin Breaker and Belmont's above-average arm strength would force them off balance, eventually leading to a fatal blow.

The combination of the Triple Spin Slash, Spin Breaker, and Belmont himself would one day become a feared legend in the mercenary world—at least, that was Belmont's hope.

“So, what's it going to be, kid?” Belmont looked down at Ariel, puffing up his large frame.

“Do you dare to duel the mighty Belmont, or will you turn tail and run, wetting yourself like a coward?”

The fellow mercenaries watching Belmont couldn't help but sigh internally.

Does he really want to duel such a young girl? Isn't that just pathetic for a grown man?

Picking fights was part of a mercenary's lifestyle, a sort of occupational hazard. It wasn't driven by malice; it was just their energetic way of living.

But this time, Belmont's intentions seemed more sinister. In a duel, the loser would become the servant of the victor.

Proposing this to a young elf girl was revealing enough of his true intentions.

‘Don't do it, kid. Don't fall for Belmont's snake-like provocation.’

The mercenaries who had earlier mocked Ariel now found themselves worried for her.

Belmont may be despicable, but his skill is no joke.

However, despite their concern, Ariel nodded and accepted Belmont's duel.

“I'll do it.”

At that, Belmont's lips curved into a sinister smile, while the surrounding mercenaries sighed, imagining Ariel's bleak future.

"Haha! Brave little one! Let's make it official, shall we? As I said, the loser serves the winner, so let's sign a contract."

Belmont hurriedly pulled out a piece of paper—a duel slave contract that was legally binding under imperial law, making his intentions crystal clear.

The other mercenaries clicked their tongues at his persistence.

"Sign here, little one. Show your courage."

Ariel signed the contract, even stamping it with her fingerprint.

"Good, good, very brave indeed." Belmont carefully tucked the contract into his chest, looking at Ariel with a gleam in his eye. *An elf as pretty as this becoming my servant? Just the thought...*

Under imperial law, duels could be held freely as long as both parties consented, regardless of location or time.

The empire didn't interfere in these fights but enforced signed contracts, punishing any violations.

Belmont was overjoyed, practically floating at the thought of a free, legal elf servant.

Though he wanted to boast to Ariel right then, "See, I've won; you're my servant now," the crowded surroundings made him decide to wait until they had passed through the gate.

The line at the gate slowly moved forward, and Belmont stuck close behind Ariel to prevent her escape.

When Ariel's turn came, the guard demanded, "Present your identification."

Ariel remained silent, and Belmont, watching her from behind, spoke up.

“Hey, kid. Show your adventurer’s license or some form of ID.”

Ariel cautiously extended her hand, revealing several gold coins in her palm.

The guard looked at her in disbelief, and Belmont, equally astonished, asked, “What? You don’t have any identification?” Ariel gave a small nod.

“In that case, here’s some gold...”

Ariel mumbled uncertainly.

In other towns, she’d been able to pay guards with plenty of gold, even receiving cheerful smiles in return.

But here, the guard’s expression only grew more severe, and Belmont sighed.

Well, this won’t work.

Stepping forward, Belmont decided to vouch for Ariel, presenting a collection of documents proving his identity and association with her.

After carefully reviewing the paperwork, the guard allowed Ariel through.

Once they were clear of the gate, Belmont held out his hand toward Ariel.

“Now, about those gold coins from earlier. Give them to me—they were meant for the guard anyway.”

Without hesitation, Ariel handed him the coins, accepting that she owed him for helping her pass the gate.

“Haha, good girl.”

Belmont grinned slyly, while the other mercenaries watching him scowled.

Getting a free elf servant and her gold coins?

They couldn't help but feel envious of Belmont.

"Well then, kid. As promised, let's duel properly, shall we?"

"Okay."

Belmont led Ariel to a deserted clearing, followed by curious mercenaries eager to watch the inevitable outcome.

Drawing his treasured sword, Belmont grinned.

"Kid, remember the name of my sword: Spin Breaker. Haha!"

Ariel nodded and drew her own sword from her back. "This is Ragnarok."

A brief silence fell over the area before laughter erupted.

"Ha-ha-ha!"

"Haha, Ragnarok, huh?" Belmont laughed, clutching his stomach.

"Scary name, isn't it? It means world's end, right? Looks like I've messed with the wrong person! Ha!"

Laughter echoed around them as the mercenaries chuckled.

"Take it easy, Belmont; she's just a kid."

"How adorable, giving such a grand name to a lump of metal! Maybe I should name my sword too—ha-ha!" Ariel felt slightly offended.

They were laughing at the sword Lionel had poured his heart into.

Fine. I'll just have to show them the true power of Ragnarok.

"Come at me, kid."

As Belmont gave his sword a little twirl, Ariel sprang forward.

Chapter 79 : Imperial Capital (3)

Ta-at.

With a light sound of a foot hitting the ground, Ariel's figure vanished from her spot.

“?”

Belmont blinked, his face filled with confusion.

Did she just disappear? What in the world...

“Ha!”

At that moment, he felt a presence behind him.

Instinctively, Belmont spun around, swinging his sword.

His honed reflexes from countless battles shone through.

Swoosh!

Belmont's Spin Breaker sliced through the air with a sharp sound.

A single strike, executed in the blink of an eye.

But nothing met his blade.

He could definitely sense a presence behind him, but his Spin Breaker had only cut through empty space.

“Dance.”

A quiet voice echoed in Belmont's ear.

In that fleeting moment, Ariel's figure was captured.

To the left.

“Haa!”

With a battle cry, Belmont swung his sword.

His earlier thought of subduing Ariel without hurting her was now completely gone from his mind.

His extensive combat experience and battle-honed instincts were warning him of danger.

Belmont’s muscular frame surged with explosive strength, launching a strike as swift as lightning.

Whoosh!

“...!”

But once again, Belmont’s Spin Breaker only swept through Ariel’s afterimage.

There was no time for surprise.

Once more, Ariel’s low voice sounded from beside him.

“Devour.”

Belmont lost his composure and began swinging his sword.

“Argh, die!”

At this point, there was no skill, no strategy. He was just swinging his sword instinctively.

Yet each strike carried power and rotation.

Belmont’s Spin Breaker whipped through the surroundings like a whirlwind, each furious blow flashing like a strike of light.

But it couldn’t even graze Ariel’s clothes.

Belmont’s attacks chased only Ariel’s afterimages, never touching her

actual form.

Swinging his sword like a madman, Belmont soon grew exhausted, collapsing to his knees, gasping for breath.

“Huff, huff, huff...!”

Sweat poured from him like rain.

Belmont’s eyes showed disbelief, and his trembling hand barely held onto the Spin Breaker.

He had no strength left to even twitch a finger.

Ta-at.

Ariel descended before Belmont, as light and graceful as a feather.

“You... who are you... really...”

Belmont struggled to ask, his voice tinged with deep helplessness.

“How... could you avoid all my attacks...”

Ariel looked at him with an expressionless gaze.

Belmont was so large that even sitting on the ground, he was eye level with Ariel.

Ariel opened her mouth slightly.

“Devour.”

“What? What nonsense are you...”

“Cry out.”

“What the—are you some crazy kid...”

At that moment, Ariel raised Ragnarok high with both hands.

Then, like a spell, she murmured softly.

“Burn, Ragnarok.”

In an instant, an unbelievable sight unfolded.

A terrifying red glow began emanating from Ragnarok.

Like a harbinger of the world’s end, the blazing red light seemed ready to consume everything around it.

Belmont was too shocked to even breathe, and the mercenaries nearby slowly backed away, fear written across their faces.

“What the hell is that...?”

“That... looks dangerous.”

“We... we should get out of here...”

Ragnarok’s red glow painted the surroundings blood-red.

Even the mercenaries watching from afar were scared, let alone Belmont, who was face-to-face with Ariel.

“Oh no...”

Belmont was consumed by extreme terror.

Sweat streamed down his forehead, and even his pants were dampened.

“Please... spare me...”

Belmont’s body trembled as he pleaded, but Ariel only looked at him coldly.

Finally, Ariel swung Ragnarok down.

“Ugh!”

Sensing death, Belmont tightly shut his eyes and raised the Spin Breaker.

Known for its speed and power, Belmont’s spinning attack was

infamous, yet Ariel avoided them all with ease.

In fact, it wasn't even a challenge.

Ariel moved too fast for the naked eye to follow.

It was as if Ariel transcended the laws of this world, moving with complete freedom.

Belmont's attacks never reached her. Wherever his sword struck, Ariel was no longer there.

"Argh, die!"

Losing his rationality, Belmont recklessly increased the speed of his spinning sword attacks, but the faster he moved, the more astonishing Ariel's movements became.

Gravity had no hold over Ariel, and air resistance seemed irrelevant.

The watching mercenaries gaped in shock.

Ariel's movements defied any explanation.

It looked as though she was dancing alone in her own dimension.

"Huff, huff, huff...!"

Eventually, Belmont collapsed from exhaustion, and Ariel reappeared in front of him.

While Belmont panted heavily, Ariel remained perfectly composed.

Not a breath out of place, her face still expressionless.

Ariel raised the old sword, Ragnarok, high once more.

And murmured some strange words, though the mercenaries didn't think much of it.

They only saw a young elf moving with astonishing agility, nothing more.

But when Ragnarok emitted its red light, their perception shifted.

This was no ordinary glow.

The red light held a sinister energy, reminiscent of hellfire, a terrifying, apocalyptic light that seemed to herald the end of this world.

The mercenaries took hesitant steps back, sensing Belmont's doom.

Belmont's playful words about picking the wrong opponent had come true.

Then Ariel brought down Ragnarok, and the distant mercenaries instinctively flinched.

Thunk—a dull sound rang out.

Ariel's Ragnarok collided with Belmont's Spin Breaker.

A moment of silence followed, and Belmont, who had shut his eyes tight, opened them.

"What...?"

When Ariel had brought Ragnarok down, Belmont had reflexively raised his Spin Breaker.

Of course, he thought it would be a pointless defiance.

There was no way his Spin Breaker could block Ragnarok.

But the result was unexpected.

The Spin Breaker remained intact.

On the other hand, Ragnarok's blade had snapped, scattering across the ground.

"Ah."

Ariel let out a small sigh, crouching down to examine the broken blade of Ragnarok.

The crimson glow that had emanated from it was now gone.

“Oh...”

Ariel, shivering slightly, seemed lost on what to do.

Everyone stood speechless, stunned by the absurd situation.

It was Belmont who finally broke the silence.

“You scared me!”

Belmont, momentarily forgetting about his damp pants, stood up energetically.

“Wow, I almost fell for it! I really thought I was going to die! Hey, kid, trying to scare me with that toy? Do you need a proper scolding?”

Belmont tapped Ariel’s head with the Spin Breaker.

But Ariel, ignoring him, only looked sorrowfully at the broken Ragnarok.

“Well, let’s call it a day with the duel. You’re my slave from now on, got it? Be grateful I’m letting you off easy. I was planning to beat you up!”

He tossed a set of shackles in front of Ariel.

He hadn’t initially planned to shackle her, but seeing her quick movements earlier, he worried she might escape.

Of course, such an action would violate the Empire’s laws, which wouldn’t benefit Ariel.

“Put those on yourself. Since you signed the contract, depending on how you behave...”

Thud.

At that moment, Ariel reached out and grabbed Belmont’s Spin Breaker.

“W-what are you...?”

Belmont tried to pull his sword back.

But the Spin Breaker wouldn't budge.

“You damned brat...”

Belmont put all his strength into it, but the Spin Breaker still didn't move.

Then came an ominous cracking sound, and the Spin Breaker disintegrated into dust.

“Wh-what...?”

Belmont let out a dumbfounded groan.

Slowly, Ariel rose to her feet.

Her eyes, red as blood, stared fixedly at Belmont.

Crunch.

Belmont felt an invisible force tightening around his neck.

Ariel had cast telekinesis.

“Guh... guh... ugh!”

Belmont struggled, but he couldn't break free from the invisible grip.

His face contorted with pain, turning an angry red.

“I surrender! I surrender! Ugh...!”

Belmont's consciousness began to fade.

Ariel's calm voice reached his ears.

“Then I've won.”

“Y-yeah! Just... let me go!”

“You’ll be my subordinate.”

“Alright, alright, please...!”

With a casual flick of her hand, Ariel released the invisible hold on Belmont’s neck.

“Cough, cough!”

Belmont coughed violently, collapsing onto the ground.

Though the invisible force had vanished, the terror remained imprinted in Belmont’s mind.

“Huff, huff...”

Belmont caught his breath, his heart racing, cold sweat dripping down his entire body.

“Get up.”

Ariel looked down at Belmont.

“We need to fix this.”

In her arms, she held the broken Ragnarok.

Chapter 80 : Imperial Capital (4)

Ariel walked steadily forward, her steps echoing through the silence.

Behind her, Belmont followed cautiously, stealing glances at her every now and then.

‘Should I run away...?’ Belmont hesitated, debating his next move.

The duel contract was still in his possession.

If he tore it up, the duel would be void, and he could escape without facing the empire’s laws.

‘I can’t be a slave to some kid...’

Despite having his Spin Breaker reduced to dust, Belmont was a skilled mercenary.

He could always find a new sword and continue honing his rotating swordsmanship, eventually making a name for himself in the mercenary world.

He was young, with a bright future ahead of him.

‘Tear up the contract, hide somewhere, and lie low for a while. Then, I can rejoin the mercenary guild...’

Just then, Ariel stopped walking, still holding the broken Ragnarok in her arms.

“Wh-What?”

Belmont stammered, caught off guard.

Just as he was contemplating escape, Ariel suddenly halted, giving him a start.

For a moment, he even wondered if she had some strange ability to read minds.

But Ariel had stopped for a different reason.

“Where’s the armory?” she asked.

“What?”

Belmont let out a sigh of disbelief.

She had been striding ahead without even knowing where she was going? He wanted to scold her for it.

“...There are many armories. This is the capital, after all. Each shop varies in skill and price. If you’re just going to fix that toy of yours...”

“Is there a place with a dwarf?” she asked.

“A dwarf? There’s one near the center of the capital. But it’s really expensive, and the dwarf there has a nasty temper. People like us would probably just get insulted and thrown out. Although, to be fair, he is known to be skilled...”

“Let’s go there.”

With a small sigh Belmont took the lead.

For now, he had no choice but to go along with this kid’s whims.

Escaping would have to wait for another time.

This elven kid was incredibly quick on her feet—she’d easily dodged all of Belmont’s attacks earlier. Running would just get him caught again.

Besides she was absurdly strong.

Breaking Spin Breaker with her bare hands? He’d never seen anyone do that before.

‘Did I mess with the wrong person...?’

It wasn't just her speed and strength; what shocked him more was that she could use magic.

That invisible force choking his neck earlier must have been telekinesis.

'I must've been out of my mind...'

In his eagerness to acquire a young, cute slave, he had rashly challenged her to a duel.

If he had just teased her a little, he wouldn't be in this mess.

'No, it'll be fine. There must be a way to escape...'

Belmont still clung to hope.

Despite her strength, Ariel seemed rather naive.

She'd handed over a gold coin to the gate guards and seemed unfamiliar with the capital's layout.

Most importantly, even though the duel was over, she hadn't asked for the contract.

Anyone else would've grabbed the contract the moment the duel ended to claim their opponent as a slave.

But Ariel seemed completely uninterested in the contract, focusing instead on that broken toy sword.

'For now, let's play along with this kid's tune.'

Belmont resolved to go along and look for an opportunity to escape later.

After a while, they reached the capital's center, where a massive cathedral loomed into view.

Its white spire towered against the blue sky, a golden dome shimmering atop it, with walls of pristine white marble.

It exuded an atmosphere of solemn reverence.

Not that it meant anything to Belmont.

As Belmont passed the cathedral entrance, Ariel suddenly stopped again, making him tilt his head in confusion.

She was narrowing her eyes, staring intently at the cathedral.

‘What’s she doing?’

It was hard to tell if she was deep in thought, utterly blank, or a bit serious.

Whatever it was, Ariel kept her gaze fixed on the cathedral for a long time.

‘Seems like she believes in God.’

Assuming she was praying, Belmont stood quietly by her side.

No matter how reckless he was, he wouldn’t dare interrupt the prayers of a kid strong enough to crush a sword with her bare hands.

People who believe in gods are usually dangerous. Among mercenaries, those who worship a god lose all reason if their faith is insulted.

Once, Belmont had sneered at a fellow mercenary who prayed nightly, hitting him on the back of the head and saying:

“Spend that time practicing your sword! God won’t protect you. He doesn’t even care about you! Gods are just excuses for the weak to lean on...”

Before he could finish, that mercenary had leapt up, foaming at the mouth, and attacked him.

Normally calm, the man had gone wild, screaming at Belmont through a bloodied face, “Belmont, you’ll face divine wrath!”

‘That guy’s eyes were totally crazed...’

Scenes like that weren’t uncommon in the mercenary world.

Mercenaries were known for their rough speech, and whenever one mocked another's faith, the believer would retaliate like a madman.

Looking at Ariel, Belmont thought she might be one of them too.

Even though she wasn't human, here she was, standing before the human empire's grand cathedral. Belmont didn't want to disturb her.

If she turned on him, he wouldn't stand a chance.

Forget handling it—his skull would shatter to dust, just like his Spin Breaker.

'Maybe I should pretend to pray, too...'

He closed his eyes, feigning reverence. Maybe, if he acted pious, Ariel would spare him later.

Meanwhile, Ariel was seriously contemplating how to bring the Saintess out.

She saw two options.

One was to break through the cathedral walls, shatter the magic barriers, overpower the holy knights, and abduct the Saintess using a teleportation scroll.

Simple and straightforward.

But the Saintess might refuse to cooperate with healing Lakia's mother.

Besides Ariel would end up on the empire's wanted list, constantly hunted.

While her life wouldn't be in danger, it would be an annoying complication.

The second option was to infiltrate the cathedral quietly and persuade the Saintess to use the teleportation scroll.

This way, she wouldn't have to break any walls or fight the holy

knights, and she wouldn't be pursued by the empire.

If she persuaded the Saintess, she'd likely cooperate in healing Lakia's mother.

Ariel decided on the second approach.

It seemed more practical.

But she'd have to wait until nightfall.

Looking around, Ariel saw Belmont standing there, eyes closed, apparently praying.

Feeling that she should respect his faith, Ariel decided to wait patiently.

Thus, the two stood in silence before the cathedral for a while.

At the armory, Ariel and Belmont finally arrived.

Upon seeing the broken Ragnarok, the dwarf exploded in anger.

"Who made this pitiful junk? Look at this break! Who made this mess? And what's with the handle? Is this supposed to be magic gear?"

The dwarf wore an incredulous expression.

"What a fool! Making this pathetic toy! It's a waste of materials! That idiot needs a good smack to come to his senses!"

Ariel quietly averted her gaze.

"I don't take garbage! Get out!" The dwarf tossed the broken Ragnarok aside.

Belmont, standing beside Ariel, tensed slightly.

'This insane dwarf... You're going to get yourself killed...!'

Though even Belmont could see that Ragnarok was indeed a terrible weapon, Ariel seemed attached to it, and tossing it like that was risky.

If Ariel got angry, the dwarf would be flattened like an insect.

This was why even the most skilled craftsman shouldn't treat customers rudely—if you cross the wrong person, you might vanish from the continent without a trace.

Chapter 81 : Imperial Capital (5)

Ariel quietly moved and picked up the fallen Ragnarok from the ground.

Her expression was calm, making it hard to read, but Belmont sensed a slight rigidity in her face.

“Please,” she said, extending Ragnarok once more toward the dwarf.

“I don’t care about the cost. Just fix it.”

The dwarf scowled deeply.

“Ha, didn’t you hear me say to get lost? Before I beat you up and throw you out—ugh!”

Belmont quickly covered the dwarf’s mouth.

The dwarf struggled flailing his stubby arms, but Belmont didn’t let go.

The size difference was so great that even the dwarf’s considerable arm strength couldn’t budge him.

“Just fix it already. I know you like money, after all,” Belmont whispered into the dwarf’s ear.

He knew this dwarf well—one of the best artisans in the imperial capital.

No one in the capital could match his craftsmanship, which attracted nobles and knights and inflated his pride, leaving commoners like Ariel and Belmont unnoticed.

Commoners weren’t profitable, after all.

“That girl has quite a high status. She’s the princess of the Elven Kingdom,” Belmont said, making the dwarf’s eyes widen in surprise.

Of course, even though she belonged to another race, a princess of any kingdom couldn’t be treated lightly.

The dwarf’s gaze shifted, revealing a hint of professional interest, and Belmont released his hand from the dwarf’s mouth.

Naturally it was a lie that Ariel was a princess of the Elven Kingdom.

But without that lie, the dwarf probably wouldn’t have considered fixing Ragnarok.

And if Ariel, out of anger, killed this dwarf? They’d be hunted by the empire, putting Belmont in danger as well.

“That can’t happen. At least not until I escape...”

After he eventually fled from Ariel, he wouldn’t care what happened—whether Ariel crushed the dwarf’s head into powder or used telekinesis to strangle the emperor. None of it would concern him.

“Hmm...” The dwarf crossed his arms and gazed intently at Ragnarok.

“If the cost doesn’t matter, fine, I’ll fix it. But I’ll charge you double for wasting my time on this junk. Is that okay?”

Ariel nodded.

“Just make it sturdy.”

“How sturdy?”

“As sturdy as possible—unbreakable.”

“That’s problematic. I can reinforce it to be sturdy, but the weight also matters...”

“The weight doesn’t matter.”

The dwarf blinked at Ariel’s response.

“This toy... you’re going to use it?”

“I am.”

“Then it needs to be light. With those thin arms of yours, you’d collapse before you even had a chance to swing it. Want me to make you a nice little dagger instead?”

Belmont cleared his throat loudly—an implicit warning.

Just do what she asked without provoking her.

Fortunately, the dwarf understood.

“...Just kidding. If you want a sword that’s absolutely unbreakable, regardless of the weight, then... Ah!”

The dwarf snapped his thick fingers.

“Come to think of it, I do have something. There’s this metal I’ve been struggling to find a use for—it might suit your needs perfectly.”

Ariel gave a faint smile and Belmont looked at the dwarf with an intrigued expression.

A metal that was difficult to handle yet perfectly suited to her request?

Belmont couldn’t hold back his curiosity.

“What is it?”

“Titanium.”

“Titanium...?”

“Yes,” the dwarf explained. “Titanium is a metal imbued with a giant’s strength. It’s absurdly heavy, but nearly unbreakable. It’s as durable as adamantite from ancient legends. The downside? Its weight could make you curse.”

“Make it with that,” Ariel said cheerfully.

The dwarf hesitated but eventually nodded.

“...Fine. But don’t complain later that you got what you asked for.”

Leaving the forge, Belmont let out a long sigh.

“This is ridiculous! Charging us so much! That dwarf is a money-grubbing miser!”

He glanced at Ariel, who looked slightly deflated. They had spent all their gold on repairing that piece of junk, Ragnarok.

Even Belmont’s gold, which he received as assurance for vouching for Ariel’s identity at the city gates, was taken.

“What’s so special about this titanium metal anyway? It’s so heavy that no one else would want it!”

Belmont couldn’t shake the feeling they’d been thoroughly swindled.

‘With that money...’

With what they’d paid to repair Ragnarok, they could’ve bought several top-grade weapons.

No wonder Belmont felt resentful.

If only his own gold hadn’t been taken, he wouldn’t have cared as much.

“So, what’s the plan now? You seem to be broke as well. Got any money left for food? No, more importantly, why did you even come to the human empire’s capital?”

Ariel, who had been standing silently, turned her gaze sharply to Belmont, making him flinch and wave his hands defensively.

“...I’m not questioning you. I just asked because I’m concerned.”

“Is there anywhere I can sell monster corpses?”

“Monster corpses? Of course. This is the human empire’s capital. It depends on the type of monster—whether it’s used for food, potion-

making, or weapons and armor materials. For weapons, that forge we were just at isn't a bad option. Usually, selling to the adventurers' guild or merchants is convenient, but you'll profit more if you choose the right place based on the corpse type. Got any corpses to sell?"

Ariel pulled out some corpses from her inventory.

The succubus corpse she had acquired when saving the baker's old woman's son, a giant scorpion from a dungeon, and a Medusa corpse...

As the rare corpses tumbled out one by one, Belmont's eyes widened in surprise.

"What's all this... They're all rare! And in pristine condition. This succubus's bones are a bit twisted, but still... I know the perfect places to sell them."

With a confident grin, Belmont motioned her to follow him.

Ariel and Belmont left the bustling city center and entered a dark alleyway.

The atmosphere was entirely different from the lively main streets.

The narrow, damp alleyways were devoid of life, and moisture dripped down the walls.

"Don't worry. The place may look shady, but it's the best spot to sell your corpses."

Ariel showed no particular reaction to Belmont's words.

Around them, suspicious-looking people lurked.

Beggars in ragged clothes, thugs with tattooed faces, mysterious figures cloaked in black—all of them looked at Ariel with smirks but didn't approach.

They went down a narrow staircase, and as they descended, the murmur of voices grew louder, turning into a lively buzz as they finally entered a large underground space.

“We’re here. This is the black market—a place where you can auction off your rare corpses,” Belmont said.

Ariel looked around. The place reeked of tobacco and alcohol. Everyone wore masks, and dark, ominous magical lights were installed all around.

“Are you two here to sell something?”

A man in a stag mask approached them, dressed in a uniform. He was an employee of the black market.

“In the black market, wearing a mask is mandatory.”

He handed them two masks: a lion mask and a rabbit mask. It seemed he had chosen the masks based on their impressions of Belmont and Ariel.

Belmont wore the lion mask, and Ariel the rabbit mask.

“Do you have any items for sale?” the staff member asked.

“We do.”

“Then I’ll lead the way. Please follow me.”

The staff led Belmont and Ariel to an inspection area where they checked the items to ensure nothing illegal or dangerous was being auctioned.

Despite the shady atmosphere, the black market was actually a legal venue.

“It’s just for the show,” Belmont explained.

“You saw the scruffy-looking folks in the alley? All those suspicious people are staff here. For some reason, nobles love this vibe, wearing masks and drinking in dark, mysterious places while enjoying an auction. Since they’re willing to spend recklessly, they might pay a high price for your rare corpses.”

Ariel nodded, thinking that the imperial capital certainly had some

unique places. But she didn't care much about that.

More importantly, she was starting to feel hungry.

She wanted to quickly auction the monster corpses and then visit a bakery, perhaps the most famous one in the capital.

Just the thought of indulging in sweet desserts made a smile form on her lips, and her heart race a little.

After waiting in the inspection room, a black market employee soon approached them.

“You may proceed now.”

Ariel and Belmont followed the staff to a stage-like area, where the auction began.

Chapter 82 : Imperial Capital (6)

“Damn, that’s a succubus! That one’s mine. No matter what!”

“Oh, a scorpion monster? I’ve never seen one in such good condition before, almost like it was just defeated...”

“Gasp! A Medusa! And it’s completely intact without any petrified parts?!”

The atmosphere in the auction hall was heating up.

The monster corpses Ariel had put up for sale were incredibly rare and valuable.

[Alright, everyone, please calm down! We haven’t even introduced the items yet!]

The masked auctioneer stepped forward, trying to calm the crowd.

However, people would not settle down. They shouted, demanding the auction begin immediately.

“Start right now! Or I’ll turn this place to ashes!”

“Do you want to lose your head?”

“Do you even know who we are?!”

At the crowd’s fierce reactions, the auctioneer forced a smile.

Normally, these were the nobles who lived quietly and politely. But the moment they entered here, they transformed into tough characters.

It was as if they were all part of some secret organization, acting wild and unruly.

Of course, it was just talk—they never actually did anything violent. They were exemplary nobles who wouldn't even litter.

They were merely acting tough to embrace the illegal, shady ambiance of the underground auction house.

Understood. I also value my life, so let's begin right away. Such dangerous individuals you are, ha-ha. Truly terrifying. Now, the first item is a succubus! Let's give it a round of applause!

“Woohoo!”

The crowd cheered enthusiastically as they clapped. The auctioneer nodded with satisfaction and approached Ariel.

Now, we have a lovely lady here to sell her succubus—a bunny girl, though she's wearing a mask. She must be very charming. Bunny girl, could you briefly explain how you acquired this succubus corpse?

The Black Market typically dealt with unusual items.

While there were ancient books and artwork, monster corpses were the most popular. The rarer and more intact, the higher the auction price soared.

The story behind each corpse also held significance.

Where the monster was encountered, how it was defeated—these stories could add to the value of the corpse.

An inspiring tale or a struggle against the monster would be ideal.

It didn't matter if it was true or not.

People would display the corpse at home, telling the story to guests with some added exaggeration.

So, the auctioneer asking Ariel about the succubus's story was a way to increase its value.

Any story would do, but a compelling or exaggerated tale would be best.

“...Just.”

Ariel opened her mouth.

“I defeated it.”

For a moment, silence descended over the auction hall.

The faces of the cheering crowd froze in place.

After a brief pause, the auctioneer recovered and tried to handle the situation.

[Ah, so you... just defeated it! Ha-ha, remarkable. Did you defeat it yourself, Miss Bunny?]

“Yes.”

[Oh, I couldn't tell just by looking. Could you tell us how you defeated it?]

The auctioneer glanced over at the succubus's body.

Aside from a slightly twisted joint, there were no visible wounds. The neck wasn't cut, and the skin wasn't slashed.

Moreover, it didn't look like any magic or drugs had been used, as there was no sign of decomposition. It seemed freshly killed.

‘Top-notch.’

This quality was rare enough to not need a backstory.

It was the best condition corpse he'd ever seen.

And it was a succubus corpse. Such a rare item that it would sell out in no time. With the current peace in demon territory, succubus corpses were almost impossible to find.

“Just with my hand like this....”

Ariel waved her hand in the air casually.

Not even in a punching motion—just a clumsy wave.

“pfft.”

Soft laughter spread among the crowd.

They found Ariel’s behavior cute.

The auctioneer didn’t miss a beat.

[Aha~! So, our bunny girl waved her hand like this to defeat it!]

“Yes.”

[Impressive. With that strength, should we challenge you to an arm-wrestling match? Ha-ha-ha!]

Someone in the crowd shouted, “So cute!”

The auctioneer nodded in agreement.

[Indeed, a very adorable bunny girl.]

The people in the auction hall probably didn’t believe Ariel.

It was hard to believe that such a small girl could wave her hand and defeat a succubus.

Maybe if it were the lion-masked man standing beside her.

But the lion-masked man, Belmont, knew Ariel’s words were true. He was absolutely sure.

‘It’s possible with this monstrous little girl...’

The bidding for the succubus began.

Everyone, take a look! This succubus corpse has no external damage! Its joints may be slightly twisted, but that’s a minor defect. And look at this face! Isn’t it captivating enough to tempt even without the succubus’s charm mist? Personally, I’d happily be her slave!

“Woohoo!”

The crowd erupted in cheers.

The loudest came from a plump man in a pig mask at the front.

The man’s name was Edmund.

He was the last baron of the Blat family.

Chubby cheeks spilling out from his mask, his coarse brown hair messy.

Edmund wasn’t particularly skilled at anything or passionate about anything.

Except for his hobby of corpse collecting.

His strange hobby was primarily indulged in the basement of his mansion, leading to it being called ‘Blat’s Gloomy House,’ and him ‘the Eccentric Baron.’

Financially secure from his inheritance, Edmund avoided social interactions, preferring to spend time alone in his basement.

His sole interest was monster corpse collecting.

He claimed he did this to “explore the mystery of death,” though it was merely an escape from reality.

On rare outings, he’d boast to his servants, “I have a meeting today. It’s top secret for the empire, so I can’t go into detail,” but in reality, he attended no such meetings.

He simply went to the Black Market in a pig mask to buy monster corpses.

‘I must have that one.’

Edmund clenched his chubby fist, determined.

It wasn’t just because it was a rare corpse.

He felt a strange surge of emotion.

Edmund had no women in his life.

He'd avoided people all his life, having no relationships with women.

Yet, with a succubus's corpse, he felt he could communicate with her in his own world.

It would be a great comfort.

And, of course, her beautiful face was a major attraction. For Edmund, who had never been popular, the succubus's beauty represented his ideal type.

Beautiful, seductive, a temptress.

'I'll keep her by my side forever. She won't reject or mock me. It's alright. Just smile beautifully.'

Edmund was excited by the thought of adorning the succubus and admiring her.

Now, the succubus corpse, defeated by our cute bunny girl's wave!
The starting bid is 200 gold!

As the auctioneer announced, the crowd hurriedly placed bids.

"250 gold!"

"300 gold!"

"500 gold!"

The bidding skyrocketed instantly.

Everyone seemed as eager as Edmund to own the succubus corpse.

Edmund's chubby jaw trembled.

He could afford up to 1,000 gold, but beyond that was impossible.

The bidding continued to rise, finally reaching 900 gold. Fortunately,

there were no higher bids.

900 gold! We have 900 gold! Any other bids?

Edmund's heart pounded. A corpse going for 900 gold was near his limit.

Sweating profusely, he couldn't give up. He had to have the succubus.

"1,000 gold!"

When Edmund called out, everyone's gaze turned to him. His face was flushed as he panted.

A brief silence followed.

All eyes darted between the auctioneer and Edmund.

Hmm, the gentleman in the pig mask has bid 1,000 gold. Any other bids?

Edmund closed his eyes, hoping no one would raise the price further.

This is the final call. Succubus corpse, 1,000 gold. Any other bids?

Edmund felt his heartbeat echoing in his ears.

Finally.

He would soon have the succubus.

Opening his eyes slowly, he looked at the beautiful face of the succubus on the stage.

'Wait for me. I'll soon have you...'

"2,000 gold."

But a voice called 2,000 gold, leaving Edmund in shock.

"Oink?!"

A choking noise escaped Edmund's mouth.

Oh! We have 2,000 gold! Any other bids?

Edmund's lips trembled.

At 1,500 gold, he could risk a few months of starvation. But 2,000 gold? Impossible without selling his mansion.

'My... my succubus...'

He hung his head, shoulders slumping.

In the end, the succubus corpse sold for 2,000 gold, and Edmund had to leave the Black Market, his plump frame retreating in loneliness.

Chapter 83 : Imperial Capital (7)

“Ariel’s corpses received unprecedented enthusiasm, allowing her to earn an enormous sum in no time.

The scorpion corpse was bought by a crustacean enthusiast, and the Medusa corpse went to the guild master of the Alchemists’ Guild.

Once the auction was over, Ariel stored the proceeds in her inventory and left the Black Market.

“Thank you! Please visit us again!”

“Take care!”

The Black Market’s manager and staff bowed deeply toward Ariel.

Their respect was almost burdensome.

But it was understandable.

From the Black Market’s perspective, sellers like Ariel were incredibly valuable. The market thrived on rare corpses, and sellers who brought them were essential.

“Hm, the response was better than I expected. And I made a lot of money. Heh heh...”

Belmont looked at Ariel with a sheepish smile. Having introduced her to the Black Market, he was hoping for at least a small cut of her profits.

But Ariel looked at him with an expressionless face and asked, “Which bakery is famous around here?”

“...Bakery? Hmm, I suppose Delight is well-known? I don’t particularly like sweets, but... anyway, it’s a good thing you came to

the Black Market. You wouldn't have made nearly as much elsewhere. Well, no need for thanks, but if you want to show your appreciation..."

"Take me to Delight."

Ariel moved behind Belmont, speaking as she did.

"I'm hungry."

"....."

Delight was located in the heart of the capital.

Its exterior looked like something out of a fairy tale.

The walls were painted in soft pastel tones, and decorations in the shape of cookies dangled here and there in gold leaf.

The colorful candy roof sparkled in the sunlight, and cute lace curtains on the windows gave a cozy vibe.

Beside the entrance was a small garden where vibrant flowers bloomed beautifully.

If Lu had been here, he'd likely have dived straight into that flower bed.

"Ahem, ahem."

Belmont cleared his throat awkwardly. He felt embarrassed about entering Delight.

To Belmont's knowledge, Delight was a place where noblewomen, dressed elegantly, gathered in small groups to enjoy tea and desserts at little tables, chatting idly.

Their conversations were trivial.

Latest fashion trends, how glamorous the latest party was, who spent secret moments with whom in a garden...

In any case, it was a place that didn't suit a rough mercenary like

Belmont.

In fact, even a man with sound mental faculties would avoid Delight if they could. Entering would mean enduring the stares of countless noblewomen and ladies.

“...Go in and eat alone. I’ll wait outside.”

Belmont said, turning his head away.

Ariel’s eyes sparkled as she looked at the interior of Delight.

“Hey, didn’t you hear me? I’ll wait outs...”

Just then, Ariel turned her gaze sharply toward Belmont.

Her eyes had completely changed from when she was looking at Delight.

It wasn’t exactly a glare. Ariel’s expression was just blank. But that made it even scarier.

Ariel opened her mouth.

“But you’re my subordinate, aren’t you?”

“Th-that’s true, but...”

Although “subordinate” sounded nice, according to the contract, Belmont was Ariel’s servant.

“Then eat with me.”

“...Fine, got it.”

In the end, Belmont had no choice but to enter Delight with Ariel.

He had a bad feeling that not going inside might cost him his life.

Of course, that was merely Belmont’s imagination.

Ariel simply thought it would be pitiful for Belmont to wait outside alone, and as her subordinate, she wanted to treat him to delicious

desserts.

With a small bell chime, the door to Delight opened.

The inside of Delight was more spacious than expected, decorated as adorably as its exterior.

In particular, the chocolate fountain and macaron tower in the middle of the shop gave an almost excessive impression, as if made with whimsical abandon.

Of course, that was just Belmont's personal view, as Ariel approached the chocolate fountain with a fluttering heart.

However, upon closer inspection, the chocolate fountain was fake—a mere decoration.

The macaron tower beside it was also just for show.

Ariel looked up at Belmont, who gazed back with an expression that seemed to say, "So what?"

"There's real food over there."

Belmont pointed toward the display case.

"This is just decoration. If you want to buy something, you need to go that way."

By the time Belmont finished speaking, Ariel was already standing in front of the display, examining the desserts.

'What speed...?'

Escaping from Ariel would be hard, Belmont thought as he walked over to her.

"I'll take this."

Ariel pointed to a tart covered in fresh fruit.

“Strawberry tart, got it.”

The employee, a young woman with a large red ribbon in her hair, smiled brightly and nodded.

“I’ll prepare that for you.”

“And this too.”

Ariel pointed to the tiramisu cake beside it.

“Tiramisu cake? Alright, I’ll get that as well.”

“And this too.”

“Ah, lemon pie, of course.”

“And this too.”

“Cream puff.”

“And this too.”

“And some macarons as well.”

“And this too.”

“.....”

Ariel continued selecting desserts without stopping.

The employee’s initial bright smile was gradually stiffening.

Belmont also looked at Ariel with a hardened expression.

‘Stop picking... Are you planning to eat everything here?’

“And this too.”

After finally selecting a mountain of desserts, Ariel chose a large cheesecake and stopped her order.

The price of Delight’s desserts was already high, and with Ariel’s

indulgent choices, the bill was quite hefty. However, Ariel had just made a significant profit at the Black Market, so it wasn't an issue.

Of course, to Belmont, it was a big issue.

‘With that money...’

It was enough to cover months of relaxation and drinks for mercenaries, yet here she was, spending it all on mere sweets.

Ignoring Belmont's dismay, Ariel confidently paid like a rich girl and said to him, “Bring the desserts over when they're ready.”

Then she quickly walked to a secluded seat and sank into a cushioned chair.

“Sigh...”

Belmont sighed and waited patiently for the desserts to arrive.

Noblewomen nearby glanced at Belmont, who looked out of place, and whispered amongst themselves. Belmont steeled himself internally.

‘I'll definitely escape... definitely.’

Because Ariel had chosen so many desserts, Belmont had to make several trips to the table with them.

If he hadn't been dressed as a mercenary but rather in an apron with a ribbon, people might have thought he was a staff member at Delight.

He endured the embarrassment and humiliation, carrying the desserts, while Ariel put half of them in her inventory.

She pointed to the remaining half and said to Belmont, “You can eat too.”

The tone, as if she were doing him a favor, made Belmont mutter curses under his breath.

It was indeed a favor—Delight’s desserts were costly, and she was offering them for free.

Yet Belmont would have preferred meat or alcohol. The sweet smell from the desserts alone was giving him a headache.

“Phew.”

He sank into a chair, but the overly soft cushion caused him to wobble slightly.

A distant giggle indicated someone had seen him stumble.

It was the same group of noblewomen who had been glancing at him earlier.

“Sigh.”

Belmont sighed and looked up.

Munch munch.

Ariel was eating her dessert with enthusiasm.

Her cheeks were puffed, almost ready to burst from the dessert she’d stuffed in her mouth.

Belmont asked, “Where are we going after this?”

“Toog shop.”

Her pronunciation was muddled with dessert, but Belmont understood right away.

The weapon shop.

She must be going to retrieve her Ragnarok after repairs.

“And after that?”

Just as Belmont asked, a scream erupted from behind.

Startled, he turned to see a figure in a shabby robe bouncing in place,

pointing at the display.

“I’ll take that, and that, and that, and that too, and all of those!!”

Judging by the voice, it sounded like a young girl, and she was picking out desserts with the same enthusiasm as Ariel had.

Instinctively, Belmont glanced at the employee’s face.

She looked even more exhausted than before.

“Um, do you... have money?”

Unlike Ariel, this shabby-robed customer lacked one key thing.

“I don’t have money....”

The employee’s expression turned incredulous, and Belmont was equally astonished.

Actually, given her outfit, he had half expected it.

Someone dressed like a beggar, trying to buy Delight’s expensive desserts—it was absurd.

If she had the money, she’d be better off buying new clothes.

“If you don’t have money, you can’t buy anything.”

The employee said with a clenched-teeth voice, as if restraining her anger.

“Oh, I see. Sorry, goodbye.”

The shabby customer slumped her shoulders and shuffled toward the door.

‘Coming in here without money...?’

As Belmont thought this, Ariel extended her hand toward him.

“?”

In Ariel's palm lay a handful of gold coins.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

When Belmont asked, Ariel gestured toward the robed customer.

"You want me to give this to her?"

"Yes."

"Why not give it to me instead? I'm just as miserable as she is...."

Then Ariel furrowed her brow slightly.

"...I'll give it to her right away."

Belmont got up, taking the gold coins Ariel handed him.

Chapter 84 : Imperial Capital (8)

The girl, dressed in a worn robe, was just about to leave Delight.

Belmont grabbed her arm.

“Hey.”

“Kyaa!”

The girl screamed immediately, her voice like the frightened cry of a small bird. She even began to struggle violently.

“No, let me go! Help!”

The attention of those nearby turned sharply to Belmont and the girl. Embarrassed, Belmont quickly released her arm. The girl pressed her hood down and retreated in haste.

“What... What were you trying to do to me?”

“Do to you? I was just trying to give you this gold coin.”

Belmont held out his palm, displaying a handful of gleaming gold coins.

“You’re giving me that? Why?”

The girl took another step back.

“What’s your angle?”

“Angle? I don’t have any. I’m just giving it to you because you seem... pitiful.”

“Are you pitying me? In that case, I refuse. I don’t want pity from someone like you!”

Belmont was taken aback. If he had been in the girl's shoes, he would have accepted the gold without hesitation. Refusing a gift was just foolish. Most people would agree.

But this girl, wearing a tattered robe and even driven out of a dessert shop for lack of money, was refusing gold simply because she didn't want to be pitied.

If this were a usual day, Belmont would have knocked her on the head and yelled, "Then get lost!" But he couldn't do that now. If he didn't give her the gold, who knew what Ariel would do to him? Belmont feared Ariel. He still vividly remembered the duel, the moment his Spin Breaker shattered to dust, and when her telekinesis tightened around his throat, his consciousness slipping away.

"Don't you want dessert?" Belmont asked.

The girl flinched, clearly tempted by the thought.

"Yes, but... I won't take money from you. You're..."

"It's not from me." Belmont gestured to Ariel, sitting nearby. "See that kid? She's the one giving it."

"That child...? Oh, she's adorable! But her ears... They're pointed."

"She's an elf."

"An... elf?"

Belmont let out a heavy sigh, his patience wearing thin.

"Just take it quietly. I don't care if you throw it away afterward; just take it. This is your final warning. If you don't accept, I might actually do something to you. I'm not a nice person."

"Yes, I know. You're a bad person."

"What?"

"But... alright. If she's the one giving it, I suppose it's okay."

The girl reached out cautiously and took the gold coin. She avoided Belmont as she moved, then dashed over to the dessert display.

“I’m back! I have money now, so give me what I asked for! That one, and that one, and that one, and that one!”

Excitedly, she placed the coin on the counter.

“Haa.”

Belmont let out a sigh.

How did it come to this? The ‘Spin Slasher,’ once fierce on the battlefield, now ignored by a homeless girl.

Belmont trudged back to where Ariel was.

“I gave her the gold. Now it’s... huh?”

Belmont stopped abruptly. Ariel, who had been nibbling on a dessert just moments ago, was now seated calmly with her eyes closed. Her head was tilted to the side, her face serene, her breathing steady.

‘Is she... asleep?’

Belmont squinted and observed her for a moment. He slowly approached, reaching out to take the fork from her hand. Ariel didn’t stir. She was definitely asleep.

A grin crept onto Belmont’s face.

Finally, a chance to escape.

He quietly sat down across from Ariel, contemplating his options. With her asleep, he could leave without issue. However...

‘It’s a shame.’

Earlier, Ariel had made a huge profit in the black market. If he could get that money, he could buy a new sword and start fresh somewhere far away.

‘With that money, I could get a new sword, move far away, and start over.’

Ariel seemed to use some sort of magical artifact, allowing her to produce monster corpses and stash away gold with ease. Rather than just taking the gold, it would be better to grab the artifact itself. It could prove very useful.

Belmont examined Ariel closely, trying to figure out where the artifact might be hidden. She wasn’t wearing any visible accessories – no earrings, necklaces, or bracelets. It was likely hidden in her clothing.

Could he take it out from here?

Belmont shook his head.

Too risky. If Ariel woke up while he was rummaging through her clothes, it’d be over. Even if she didn’t, the attention of those around would be a problem. The moment he slipped his hand into her clothing, the guards would likely come rushing in.

Belmont turned his gaze to the girl in the worn robe, who was still standing around, waiting for her dessert.

Maybe he could enlist her help. She could reach into Ariel’s clothes without it seeming suspicious.

Belmont stood and approached her, keeping a slight distance to avoid startling her.

“Hey.”

The girl turned, her mouth barely visible under the hood of her robe.

“What is it?”

“I’d like to talk for a moment. I have a proposition, one that might benefit you.”

“No, I won’t do anything with someone like you. Besides, it sounds like you’re planning something bad.”

“...?”

Belmont looked surprised. This girl had treated him as a villain from the start. It was as if she could sense his nature.

Still, he wouldn't give up that easily.

“What do you mean, something bad? I'm currently in a difficult situation, and I need your help. If you could lend a hand...”

“You look down on me. If you speak to me one more time, I'll scream.”

Belmont's face twisted.

It seemed impossible to get her help. She was too uncooperative.

“Just you wait. The next time we meet...”

“Kyaa~! Help!”

The girl let out a half-hearted cry. It wasn't loud enough to attract attention like before, but it made Belmont tense, fearing Ariel might wake.

In the end, he shot the girl a harsh glare and stormed out of Delight.

Leaving Ariel's magical artifact behind was disappointing, but escaping took priority.

“Huff... Huff...”

Once outside, Belmont ran toward the armory. Since he couldn't steal Ariel's artifact, he aimed to at least retrieve Ragnarok.

Originally a mere hunk of metal, Ragnarok had been reforged with the rare metal Titanium by a skilled dwarf, greatly enhancing its value.

If he sold it, he could secure a new Spin Breaker.

He entered the armory, where a dwarf greeted him with a curt expression.

“Alone? Where’s that elf princess?”

“She’s... preoccupied. Is the repair done?”

“Just finished.” The dwarf pointed to the workbench.

“See for yourself.”

Ragnarok lay on the bench, the blade transformed. Once an unidentifiable black, it now gleamed silver, reminiscent of Ariel’s hair color, which unsettled Belmont slightly.

“Hmph.”

He reached out and touched the blade, feeling its cool surface and significant weight.

“Oh...”

He couldn’t help but marvel.

Just touching it, he felt the overwhelming power of Ragnarok radiate through him.

“Heh heh.”

The dwarf chuckled.

“It’s an absurd weapon, really. I’m not sure it even counts as a sword anymore. Though I did what the elf princess asked, it’s too heavy to wield.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, and that toy with the red light is still intact. Using Titanlium to make a sword was certainly a strange request, but here you go. Oh, and I didn’t touch the handle.”

“Thanks. By the way, how much do you think this sword would fetch if sold?”

The dwarf frowned.

“Selling it? After all the trouble I went through?”

“I mean, the elven kingdom might want to know.”

“Hmph.” The dwarf stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Titanium is nearly impossible to obtain. But despite its durability, its weight is an issue. To some, it might not be worth even a single coin, while to others, it could be worth over ten thousand gold.”

“I see.”

Belmont nodded, satisfied. He was confident he could sell it for ten thousand gold. All he needed was a vain noble to make it happen.

“Thanks for the hard work.” Belmont lifted Ragnarok – or at least tried to. But it wouldn’t budge, as if glued to the workbench.

“What are you doing? You don’t expect to carry that alone, do you?” The dwarf looked at him with wide eyes.

“I told you, Titanium is incredibly heavy. You’d need at least four of you to move that sword.”

The dwarf laughed, and Belmont’s face twisted.

‘What on earth has this mad dwarf made...?’

Chapter 85 : The Saint (1)

The clergy hold the once-a-year 'Day of Holy Blessing' in high regard.

They believe that the blessings and grace of God bestowed upon the empire depend on the sincerity of their prayers on this day.

As the Day of Holy Blessing approaches, they clean the cathedral thoroughly, creating a reverent atmosphere.

They decorate the chapel beautifully with ornaments and candles, and the choir rehearses specially prepared hymns.

The archbishop and senior clergy review the prayers and rituals, while the holy knights strengthen patrols and guards around the cathedral.

And the saint...

'Hungry...'

The saint begins fasting several days prior.

Through fasting, they transcend bodily desires to display their profound devotion to God, expressing a heartfelt plea for divine grace and focusing their spirit entirely on prayer, reaching a higher spiritual state...

'I don't care about any of that. I'm just starving!'

The saint, Levana, clutched her growling stomach, pacing around the sanctuary.

It was the third day since her fast began.

Her vision blurred from hunger, and whenever she tried to sit and pray, her stomach's growls distracted her.

‘I might actually die like this...’

Levana desperately looked around the sanctuary.

The sanctuary was the holiest space in the cathedral, and no one but the saint was allowed to enter.

There was no food, no water, not even a bathroom.

Levana had entered the sanctuary that morning and wouldn’t be able to leave until evening.

Today was the Day of Holy Blessing.

‘Calling this a sanctuary is just a fancy way of saying it’s a prison.’

She cursed whoever came up with such a ridiculous day, wishing they’d trip on the street. She also resented the archbishop who ‘imprisoned’ her here, hoping what little hair he had left would all fall out.

Or better yet, that the whole world would just end.

From outside, she could hear the solemn hymn being sung.

It was the Day of Holy Blessing, and everyone had gathered in the chapel to offer pious prayers.

Which meant that bothersome hymn would continue all day until nightfall.

It was bad enough to be starving, but now she had to listen to that droning hymn all day?

‘Maybe I should just die.’

Levana had the blasphemous thought.

Of course, she knew where those who took their own lives went. Probably hell.

But to Levana, this place felt like hell itself. This tiny sanctuary was a kind of hell that made no sense.

‘Hungry...’

Levana rolled around on the floor. In this state of hunger, there was no way she could pray.

Others might be earnestly praying in the chapel, but...

‘At least they got to eat something. I haven’t even had a drop of water. So I hope everything just falls apart.’

After rolling around, Levana grew tired and began to bang her forehead on the sanctuary floor.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

‘This is my prayer.’

Her forehead turned red and swollen. If the archbishop saw this, he’d surely raise a fuss, but she could heal it before she left in the evening.

Incidentally, Levana’s healing magic was the best on the continent.

‘If only I could just faint.’

She thought, banging her head harder.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

If she passed out, she wouldn’t feel the hunger, and when she woke, it would be evening, with the prayers over.

‘Then I’d dash out and devour all the food in the cathedral!’

She thought, though she knew it wouldn’t happen.

After the prayers, all that awaited her was a small portion of bread and vegetables.

This was due to the cathedral’s emphasis on austerity and poverty.

‘They stuff themselves outside with all kinds of delicacies...’

People outside the cathedral could eat whatever they wanted.

But the saint lived her whole life within the cathedral, from birth until death.

There was only one way out.

When a hero's party was formed to vanquish the Demon King, the saint was essential.

Rumor had it that a hero had emerged in a city called Gold Castle.

Excited by the news, Levana once brought it up to the archbishop.

"Excuse me, Andersen. I heard a hero has appeared?"

"Indeed."

"Oh! So does this mean a hero's party will form soon? Am I going to vanquish the Demon King?"

The archbishop smiled gently as he replied.

"Ha ha, unless the Demon King's army declares war, there's no reason to form a hero's party. Even if war breaks out, it'll be some time before we can confront the Demon King. Both the hero and the saint are still quite young, so don't worry. You're safe."

"...?"

Levana felt a wave of despair and spent days in a slump.

'I thought I'd get to leave and eat all kinds of delicious food once the hero's party was formed...'

Sighing deeply, Levana resumed banging her head on the floor.

Now wasn't the time for other thoughts. She had to faint as soon as possible.

Thud! Thud! Thud!!

But soon, she stopped.

'Ugh... This actually hurts more than I thought...'

With teary eyes, she rubbed her forehead.

A round bump had formed. It hurt too much to keep banging her head.

Even fainting wasn't something the saint could control.

Levana felt herself growing increasingly weary.

She didn't want to think about anything anymore. And so, she gave up on banging her head; it hurt too much.

She hated pain. She was hungry, but pain was worse.

'Give me food... Give me food...'

Rolling on the floor again, she suddenly noticed something and opened her eyes wide.

"Huh? What's this?"

It was a faint crack in the floor.

On closer inspection, it didn't seem like an ordinary crack. It looked intentional.

Levana grabbed the edge with her fingertip and lifted.

A square piece of the floor rose, revealing a dark space below. Inside was a ladder leading down.

"Is this... a secret passage?"

Levana looked at it in confusion.

This was the sanctuary, a place only the saint herself could enter, and she certainly hadn't built this.

"Should I go down...?"

She hesitated. She didn't know who had built it or why, but maybe it could lead her out of the sanctuary.

“I’ll go down.”

Her decision was swift; staying here would starve her to death.

Besides, Levana had a curious nature she couldn’t resist.

“Light.”

Casting a spell to dispel the darkness, she carefully began descending the ladder.

She didn’t forget to cover the floor before going down.

No one should enter the sanctuary, but she didn’t want anyone discovering this passage. It might prove useful.

After a short descent, she reached a small chamber. There was writing on the wall.

Hello? My name is Christina. If you’ve found and come down here, you must be a saint too. Nice to meet you.

“!”

Levana’s eyes widened.

If this was Christina, she was a saint who had existed long ago.

Though she was no longer alive, she was technically Levana’s predecessor.

You must be hungry, right? The cathedral doesn’t offer any rich or sweet foods, only bland ones. Isn’t it unfair? Just because you’re born a saint, you have to live on such tasteless things. Who would want to be a saint under these conditions?

“Exactly! That’s what I’ve been saying!”

Levana shouted without realizing it. She felt tears welling up from the overwhelming sympathy.

And once a year, on the Day of Holy Blessing, you’re trapped in the sanctuary all day, forced to pray without food or even a bathroom?

That's torture, not prayer!

"Oh! Yes, it's torture! It's absolutely not prayer!"

So, I prepared this passage for you. No one else can enter the sanctuary, and no one dares to speak to a praying saint. This means we have a full day to enjoy our freedom!

"Thank you, Christina..." Levana clasped her hands, tears streaming down her cheeks. At that moment, Christina was her personal savior.

If you go through the small door here, you'll find yourself in the heart of the imperial capital. The entire cathedral is surrounded by a holy barrier, but it doesn't affect saints. We're free to come and go. So, go out and enjoy yourself. Sorry, but I couldn't leave any money. You'll have to figure that part out yourself.

"Yes, ma'am! I'll handle it on my own! No problem!"

Lastly, I must warn you – the outside can be dangerous, so be careful. Fortunately, we saints can recognize bad people, so you should be fine. And it's best to return by evening. Keep this passage as your secret, and use it again next year. Goodbye.

"Thank you, senior..."

Levana closed her eyes and prayed sincerely to her predecessor, Saint Christina.

It was a heartfelt prayer, born of deep gratitude.

"I'll never forget your grace, Christina..."

After finishing her prayer, Levana walked through the small door and soon found herself in the heart of the imperial capital.

Chapter 86 : The Saint (2)

Levana, who had emerged into the capital's center, donned a worn, abandoned robe nearby.

The robe had a musty smell, but she had no choice; without it, people might recognize her.

Levana was the continent's only saint and a well-known figure in the imperial capital.

With the shabby robe on, she glanced around and soon spotted a very beautiful building.

It was Delight, a store that looked like a house made of sweets.

“Wow...”

Levana, as if controlled by dark magic like an undead, shuffled her way toward it.

As soon as she opened the door, a cheerful bell rang.

Ding-ling.

At the same time, a sweet scent tickled her nose.

“Wow...”

Levana's mind became hazy. This place was heaven itself.

Warm lighting, pastel-colored walls, a thick pink carpet covering the floor.

In the center of the store was a fountain that seemed to be made of chocolate, and next to it stood a tower of stacked macarons.

It was a space filled with sweetness and happiness.

And above all...

‘!!’

Various desserts displayed in the showcase!

Levana darted over to the showcase and peeked out from her shabby robe, examining the desserts inside.

“Wow...”

A gasp escaped her lips.

Inside the display were beautifully arranged desserts that looked both fancy and delicious.

Tarts topped with fruits, creamy-looking tiramisu, colorful macarons—all the desserts sparkled, capturing Levana’s gaze.

“Wow, wow...”

As Levana stared wide-eyed at the desserts, a cheerful female employee greeted her from the front.

“Welcome, dear customer!”

“Ugh.”

Levana flinched and shrank back, then asked in a trembling voice.

“Um, um... can I... eat these?”

“Of course! Feel free to choose whatever you want!”

“Eek!”

Levana, unable to hold back, let out a little scream and bounced in excitement.

Being told to choose whatever she wanted felt like an invitation to heaven itself.

“That one, and that one, and that one, and that one, and... all of it, please!!”

Levana pointed at each dessert with glee, exclaiming in excitement.

The employee’s face gradually hardened, but Levana didn’t notice.

After a while, the employee cautiously asked, “Excuse me, but... do you have money?”

“Mo-money...?”

Levana shrank again.

“I... don’t have any money...”

“If you don’t have money, you can’t make a purchase.”

The employee’s voice sounded somewhat irritated.

Levana lowered her head.

“Oh... yes, of course. I’m sorry. Goodbye.”

She turned away, feeling defeated.

Levana knew that buying food required money. It was just that her hunger and the sight of the sweet treats had made her forget.

‘I need to get some money first.’

There was still time before evening.

If she managed to get some money, she could come back and buy all those desserts.

Just as Levana was about to leave Delight...

“Hey.”

Someone grabbed her arm.

Levana started devouring the desserts hungrily, stuffing a strawberry

tart into her mouth in one go, grabbing tiramisu with her hands, and shoving two macarons into her mouth.

There was no fork in sight, only her cream-covered fingers.

If Archbishop Andersen had seen this sight, he would have scolded her harshly. But he wasn't here now.

It was just the starving Levana and the sleeping Ariel.

‘Ah, bliss!’

Levana shivered with delight.

The fragrant fruit and soft cream melted together harmoniously in her mouth.

A taste that was truly heavenly!

Ariel, who was sleeping peacefully in front of her, didn't bother Levana, who was solely focused on her sweet happiness.

A while later, Ariel opened her eyes.

With half-opened eyes, Ariel looked at Levana, who was engrossed in her desserts, her face full of bliss.

Noticing Ariel's gaze, Levana abruptly raised her head.

...

“Nom... ack, ack, cough, cough!”

Levana choked and started coughing in surprise.

Ariel handed her a glass of milk from the table, and Levana gulped it down.

“Whew, I almost died there. Thanks; you saved me.”

Ariel quietly looked around. While she'd dozed off, the table had turned into a dessert disaster zone.

And in front of her sat a girl in a shabby robe, with no sign of Belmont.

“Thank you, by the way. You’re the one who gave me the money, right? I have a little left here. I’ll give it back to you.”

Levana reached out and handed Ariel a silver coin, the change from her dessert purchase.

“And that man who was here... he disappeared. He tried to propose something to me, but I refused.”

“Oh.”

Ariel nodded slightly, realizing that Belmont had disappeared while she was asleep.

It didn’t matter. Though she had technically enslaved him in their duel, Belmont wasn’t someone she particularly needed.

Ariel stood up.

It was about time to retrieve Ragnarok. Afterward, she planned to infiltrate the cathedral, convince the saint, and bring her to the dragon’s lair.

She needed to heal Lakia’s mother.

As Ariel left Delight, Levana trailed closely behind.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“To the armory.”

“Armory? Ah, you’re an adventurer, aren’t you? I envy you. I’ve wanted to go on adventures since I was young, but it’s not something I’m allowed to do. By the way, you’re an elf, right? Your ears are pointy. Does that mean you can hear better?”

For a moment, Ariel wondered, ‘Is that true?’ Could she actually hear better with pointy ears? She hadn’t particularly felt that way.

Levana moved closer to Ariel and asked,

“What’s your name, by the way?”

“Ariel.”

When Ariel answered briefly, Levana nodded with a smile.

“I see. Ariel. Thanks for telling me, Ariel. And I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you my name.”

“But I’ll tell you this—I want to be friends with you.”

“Friends?”

“Yeah. You’re a good person. Although, just for today, I’ll stick around with you.”

“There’s no need for that...”

At that moment, they noticed someone approaching from ahead. Ariel stopped, and Levana, who was walking beside her, stopped too.

“Huh?”

Levana pointed with her finger.

“It’s that bad guy from earlier!”

Standing before Ariel was none other than Belmont.

Realizing how heavy Ragnarok was Belmont had rushed outside, then brought two mercenaries from a nearby inn.

He was determined to haul Ragnarok, no matter what.

The weight of Ragnarok was beyond imagination, but he couldn’t just give up.

With its weight highlighting the value of Titanlium, he knew he could sell it for a high price.

“Ugh, Belmont, why is this thing so heavy?”

“It’s no longer a sword. And why exactly do we have to move it?”

The two mercenaries Belmont had brought were not the sharpest, ones he had often relied on during his mercenary days.

He planned to use them this time to move Ragnarok back to his inn.

“Stop complaining and just move it. If I sell this sword, I’ll give you a share.”

Belmont said, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

With the help of these two, he managed to lift Ragnarok onto the cart, but even with the three of them pushing, the cart barely budged.

“Hah, I can’t push any more. My arms are shaking.”

“Me neither. Forget the money; we need to survive first.”

The two mercenaries pushing from behind stopped.

“Besides, there’s a rumor you’re now an elf’s slave, Belmont.”

“Yeah, they say you’re not a mercenary anymore.”

Belmont frowned.

“Shut up and push the cart. We have to get out of this area, or we might all die.”

“What? D-die? Why?!”

“I don’t want to die. I haven’t even gotten married yet!”

Belmont stopped pulling the cart and approached the two mercenaries.

“When have I ever been wrong?”

“Never, I think? Or... maybe once?”

Belmont’s eyes turned fierce.

"I swear, if we don't get this sword to my inn right now, both your heads will end up as dust. Got it? But if you help me get it there, I'll give each of you a thousand gold. That's a promise."

"A-a thousand gold?!"

The mercenaries' eyes widened.

"With a thousand gold, I could get married!"

"With a thousand gold, I'd be done with dangerous mercenary work..."

"I don't care what you do. I don't have time to listen. But this I swear—get this sword there, and I'll give you the thousand gold. I swear it on my honor. You know how heavy a promise on a mercenary's honor is, right?"

"Y-yes."

They nodded, though, in truth, mercenaries had no sense of honor.

Swearing on one's honor was something knights usually said.

"Alright, then push harder! Why are you mercenaries so weak?"

Belmont resumed pulling the cart, while the two mercenaries strained to push it from behind.

Even with the three large men hauling it, the cart moved slowly, weighed down by the impossibly heavy Ragnarok.

'Damn it...!'

Belmont gritted his teeth, his arms trembling, but he had to keep pushing.

If he lingered and Ariel woke up...

"Huh?"

At that moment, someone shouted from ahead.

“There’s that bad guy from before!”

Belmont looked up.

The shabby-robed girl from Delight was pointing at him.

And beside her stood Ariel, quietly observing him.

Belmont felt a shadow of death looming over him.

This was why he’d tried to leave the area quickly, but he’d ended up face-to-face with Ariel.

Behind him, the two mercenaries spoke.

“What are you doing, Belmont? Hurry up and push the cart.”

“Yeah, let’s sell this heavy sword and get our thousand gold each.”

“Shut up...”

Chapter 87 : The Saint (3)

Clop, clop.

Watching Ariel slowly walking towards him, Belmont swallowed hard. His heart pounded, and his lips trembled.

‘Damn it, maybe I should’ve just run away.’

Belmont regretted his choice. If he had fled without stealing Ragnarok, he wouldn’t be in this situation. His greed had only brought him trouble.

In the meantime, Ariel approached the cart and began inspecting Ragnarok. Her fingers softly grazed the blade of the sword.

“Hey, that’s dangerous.”

At that moment, two of Belmont’s fellow mercenaries warned Ariel.

“Don’t touch that sword.”

“Yeah, it’s incredibly heavy. You might get hurt, so go play elsewhere.”

The two mercenaries seemed concerned for Ariel, but Belmont was more worried about them. Dangerous? Who here was actually the most dangerous?

If Ariel decided to, she could easily turn both mercenaries’ heads into dust. Just then, Ariel grabbed the handle of Ragnarok.

“Hey! I told you not to do that!”

“Hey!”

The two mercenaries scolded Ariel with stern faces.

“What are you thinking? You could get hurt....”

But it was only for a moment.

When Ariel lifted Ragnarok effortlessly, the two mercenaries gaped, blinking as if they'd malfunctioned, speechless.

Belmont was also shocked to see Ariel lifting Ragnarok so easily, though not as much as the other two. He had anticipated it, at least a little. Ariel would lift that sword.

...Though he hadn't expected it to be that easy.

Despite lifting the heavy sword that even three mercenaries couldn't pull in a cart, Ariel's expression remained calm, as if she were picking up a feather.

“Haha....”

Belmont quickly spoke.

“Th-the repair went well, right? You were sleeping so soundly at the dessert shop that I decided to bring the sword for you. My comrades here were helping.”

Belmont smoothly lied, showing quick wits for survival.

He admired his lie, thinking it was quite believable, considering he'd thought it up on the spot. If the one facing him were an experienced adult, it might not work, but Ariel was just a naive young elf.

‘If I can take advantage of a child's innocence, maybe I can get out of this...’

“Lies!”

But the girl in the shabby robe, Levana, standing next to Ariel, shouted.

“That's a lie! You're lying right now!”

Belmont's face twisted. It had to be that girl again.

“What’s your basis for saying such nonsense?”

Belmont glared at her menacingly.

“Dirty little tramp, keep your mouth shut, or I’ll....”

Belmont suddenly stopped. He could feel a gaze beside him.

Ariel was looking straight at Belmont with Ragnarok resting casually on her shoulder.

Belmont bit his lip.

This was dangerous. He might’ve been able to escape, but now, because of this tramp girl, things were getting complicated. He needed to shut the girl up somehow...

“Belmont, what is going on here?”

A voice came from beside him.

“Didn’t you promise to sell that sword and give us a thousand gold each?”

“Yeah. But now, it doesn’t even seem like it’s your sword.”

“Sigh....”

Belmont brushed his face with his hand and sighed deeply. It seemed lying wouldn’t work. These dimwitted mercenary comrades lacked any sense.

They had always been tools for Belmont, but now their cluelessness was backfiring on him.

Belmont cautiously assessed the situation. With things going this way, he’d have to take a more aggressive approach.

Swish!

Moving swiftly, he drew the sword from one of his fellow mercenaries’ waists. Charging forward, he grabbed Levana by the shoulder, pressing the blade close to her neck.

“Kyaa!”

Levana shrieked in terror, while the other mercenaries stared at Belmont with wide eyes.

“Belmont!”

“What... what are you doing?!”

“Shut up!”

Belmont turned his gaze to Ariel.

“Stay still, elf. The moment you try anything, I’ll slice this tramp girl’s neck. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

Ariel stood still, not moving.

A smirk appeared on Belmont’s lips. Though they hadn’t known each other long, Belmont had already figured out Ariel’s character. From what he knew, Ariel would never let Levana die.

“Heh, hand over your magic items. The one filled with gold coins. If you don’t, this tramp girl’s life is over.”

In Ariel’s eyes, Belmont’s lie was quite clumsy. Claiming he tried to retrieve Ragnarok while she slept? It was far more likely that he’d tried to steal it, only to have the misfortune of running into her.

Even without Levana and the mercenaries’ words, Ariel wouldn’t have believed Belmont anyway.

“Hand it over now, that magic item! You want to see this girl die?”

Belmont shouted with wide eyes, glaring at Ariel.

Ariel stared at him quietly and spoke.

“You could’ve just run.”

“...What?”

Belmont furrowed his brow.

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

“I wouldn’t have chased you if you’d run.”

“What are you saying?! I warned you! If you don’t hand over your magic items, this tramp girl dies. Understand? I have nothing left to lose!”

But did he really have nothing left to lose?

Ariel thought about this as she approached Belmont.

She hadn’t felt any particular affection for him.

But still, the memories of wearing masks together at the black market, visiting the ill-tempered dwarf’s weapon shop, and going to Delight would remain in a small corner of her memory.

“You could have just run.”

Ariel continued walking, and Belmont began to lose his composure.

“Don’t come any closer! I’ll really kill her! Do you think I won’t?”

He didn’t like the way Ariel was looking at him. Though her gaze was indifferent as always, there was a hint of melancholy in it, making it hard for him to bear.

“This is your doing!”

In the end, Belmont attempted to slit Levana’s throat with his sword.

But he couldn’t move his arm.

Not only his arm but his entire body felt restrained, as if held by an invisible force.

‘Telekinesis!’

He couldn’t even speak or blink, only his thoughts remained his own.

‘H-how can this be...?!’

Belmont knew Ariel could use telekinesis; she'd already used it in their previous battle. However, his understanding of telekinesis didn't account for completely immobilizing someone's entire body.

Moments later, Belmont's arm, which had been holding Levana, dropped down. Of course, this wasn't by his will but by Ariel's telekinesis.

"Hah, hah...."

Levana staggered, gasping for breath, and Ariel approached to support her.

"A-Ariel...."

Levana was in shock.

This was her first experience with someone targeting her life or having a blade pressed against her neck. Most of all, having faced Belmont's malice directly, Levana was trembling uncontrollably, tears streaming down her face.

"Ariel...."

"Let's go."

Ariel supported Levana and began walking.

Meanwhile, Belmont stood still, like a scarecrow, though he was internally screaming at Ariel.

'Where do you think you're going?! Give me the magic item! At least leave some gold coins!'

Whether Ariel knew of Belmont's inner screams or not, she and Levana grew further and further away.

A little while later, Ariel and Levana stopped at the end of the street. Ariel turned and looked at Belmont.

Though they were a fair distance away, her gaze still held a hint of sorrow.

‘Why does she keep....’

Belmont felt a surge of emotion welling up within him.

‘Why does she keep looking at me with those eyes?! Who does she think she is to look at me like that?! I am the renowned Spin Slasher Belmont among mercenaries!’

At that moment, Belmont’s eyes widened.

His arm, holding the sword, moved on its own, bringing the blade to his own neck, pressing it forward as if in self-sacrifice.

“Hey, Belmont! What are you doing?”

“Are you... killing yourself?!”

His comrades tried to grab Belmont’s arm in shock, but it was useless.

“Stop, Belmont!”

Belmont’s arm was under an external force so strong that neither his own nor his comrades’ strength could resist it.

Inwardly, Belmont pleaded desperately.

‘N-no, please, spare me! Spare me!!’

And then, in the next moment, the sword Belmont held pierced through his own neck.

Ariel guided Levana to a quiet alleyway. There was an old sewer and a worn-out rug someone had discarded.

Ariel carefully seated Levana on the rug.

“You’re safe now.”

Levana nodded at Ariel’s calm voice, though she was still gasping and trembling, unable to fully recover from the shock.

“Th-thank you, Ariel.”

Levana said, embracing Ariel.

“For helping me.”

Ariel gently patted her back.

As Levana began to calm down, her trembling gradually subsided.

“Ariel, did you... kill that man?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so....”

Levana slowly nodded. As she'd walked away with Ariel, she'd sensed the malice emanating from Belmont fade away. It was a clear sign of his death.

A silence fell around them.

Ariel continued to pat Levana's back rhythmically, while Levana quietly caught her breath.

After a while, Levana spoke up.

“Ariel, my name is Levana. I thought you should know.”

Ariel nodded.

Levana.

Now that she'd shared her name, Ariel decided to remember it.

Levana's breaths gradually softened, eventually turning into the gentle rhythm of sleep. As her arms around Ariel slackened, she fully succumbed to slumber.

Ariel carefully laid Levana down on her lap, letting her rest her head there. Levana slept soundly, nestled against Ariel's knee.

Chapter 88 : The Saint (4)

Levana was running across a fluffy cake. Around her, rainbow-colored macarons floated, tempting her. She reached out, grabbed one, and popped it into her mouth.

Munch, munch.

The sweetness spread throughout her mouth, and a happy smile appeared on her face.

At that moment...

“Stop!”

Something burst out from the cake’s surface.

It had the body of a baby angel but the face of Archbishop Andersen—a bizarre creature.

“Saintess! You mustn’t give in to sweet temptations!”

Andersen flapped his wings and flew toward Levana, who screamed and fell back.

“Saintess! You must maintain purity of spirit through modest meals! That is the path to a pure heart and a stronger faith!”

At Andersen’s words, Levana sprang up and began to run, still munching on the macaron in her mouth.

“Stop, Saintess! Do not succumb to the sweet temptation! Saintess!”

Andersen shouted as he chased her from behind. But Levana didn’t stop. She kept running, shoving floating macarons into her mouth, her cheeks puffing out.

“Saintess! Spit them out! You mustn’t eat them!”

Levana grabbed even more macarons. Just as she was about to put another one in her mouth, the ground beneath her gave way, and she started to fall.

“Ahhh!”

Flailing her arms, Levana opened her eyes.

Above her against the night sky, she saw Ariel looking down at her.

“A... a dream?”

Levana blinked and sat up, realizing she had been sleeping on Ariel’s lap.

“Oh.”

Levana quickly touched her head, startled. Her hood had completely fallen off, likely while she was sleeping.

She glanced nervously at Ariel.

Munch, munch.

Ariel was just quietly eating a macaron, her cheeks puffed up like Levana’s in the dream.

It didn’t seem Ariel had recognized her as the saintess. Considering Ariel was an elf and an adventurer, she likely didn’t know the saintess’s face.

‘But she saw my face. This is definitely risky...’

Just then, Ariel offered her a macaron.

“Want one?”

Levana immediately stopped thinking and opened her mouth. Ariel placed the macaron in her mouth.

‘It’s... delicious!’

The soft texture and the sweetness filled her mouth completely. It was the heavenly taste she had felt in her dream.

“I also have milk.”

Ariel pulled out a cup filled with milk from the air and handed it to her. Levana took it and drank it in big gulps.

The combination of the sweet macaron and the creamy milk felt like it was melting her.

She felt so happy, like she was in paradise.

“Thank you, Ariel.”

At Levana’s gratitude, Ariel gave a small nod, then stood up and said to Levana,

“It’s time to go.”

“Oh, really?”

Levana looked disappointed.

“Uh, Ariel, can we meet again? I’d feel sad if we parted like this....”

Her eyes reddened slightly.

Levana didn’t have many friends—just two or three, and all of them were older clergy members. This was the first time she had made a friend her own age, like Ariel.

Ariel looked quietly at Levana. Answering her question was a bit difficult. Even Ariel didn’t know if they’d meet again.

All Ariel could say was, “I had fun today.”

Levana hugged Ariel tightly, a farewell embrace.

“I had fun too, Ariel....”

Levana spoke with a trembling voice.

“Let’s definitely meet again someday....”

Ariel nodded silently, then slowly turned and started walking down the alley.

Levana felt a pang in her heart, but she wiped away the tears forming in her eyes and smiled. If fate allowed it, they might meet again someday. If she worked hard and looked forward to that day...

“Oh.”

Levana suddenly raised her head.

The sky had grown dark without her realizing it. She couldn’t waste any more time here; she needed to return to the sanctuary.

The prayer service at the cathedral would be over by now. Archbishop Andersen would be waiting for her at the sanctuary’s entrance.

Levana quickly got to her feet and started running.

Panting, she raced down the narrow, dark alleyways, weaving through the old, dilapidated buildings until she reached the hidden passage.

The passage led to the basement of an abandoned building. At the entrance, a small kitten was sitting, wagging its tail as if it recognized Levana.

If anyone else had approached, it would’ve run away, but for Levana, it showed unusual affection. Almost as if it sensed her saintly presence.

“Hello, little one.”

Levana petted the kitten’s head gently, and it purred in delight.

“Sorry, but I’m in a bit of a hurry. I’ll see you next time.”

Levana passed the kitten and descended the basement stairs. At the bottom, she found a small door, which led to the cathedral’s holy

barrier.

The holy barrier was extremely strong; any being without sacred power would be repelled. But for the saintess, it was harmless.

Levana passed through the barrier effortlessly and entered a small room leading to the sanctuary. On the wall was an inscription by Saint Christina.

“Thank you, Senior... because of you, I had a wonderful experience.”

Levana bowed her head toward the wall and then climbed the ladder.

“Oh.”

She stopped midway and removed the shabby robe she was wearing. Returning to the sanctuary in such attire would certainly raise Andersen’s suspicions.

“Hmm....”

Then she realized that the smell was an issue as well. The musty odor from the old robe had clung to her body.

Suddenly, Levana thought of a solution.

“Purification.”

She murmured softly, casting a purification spell.

A radiant light enveloped her entire body, flowing gently and purging every bit of dirt and grime.

As the light subsided, Levana was left in her original clean and pure state. The unpleasant smell had vanished entirely, replaced by a subtle, sacred fragrance.

“Hehe.”

Levana thought herself rather clever. To have thought of using purification in this situation!

‘Am I... perhaps a genius?’

But then she realized something.

‘No, I should’ve just purified the robe from the start. That would have kept it clean.’

Perhaps she wasn’t quite a genius after all.

Now wasn’t the time to be thinking about this.

Levana resumed climbing the ladder.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Andersen was pacing anxiously outside the sanctuary. Despite the prayer service ending, Levana hadn’t come out yet.

‘She’s taking quite a long time in prayer today.’

Normally, by now, she would have already finished and rushed out of the sanctuary, eagerly looking for something to eat.

‘I hope nothing has happened to her.’

Andersen felt a surge of unease, but there was nothing he could do. The sanctuary was the holiest place in the cathedral. Only the saintess was allowed to enter, and it was forbidden to disturb her prayers.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the sanctuary door opened, and Levana emerged.

Andersen greeted her with a smile.

“Welcome back, Saintess.”

“You too, Andersen.”

“Aren’t you hungry? Shall I prepare some food?”

“It’s fine.”

“...Really? You’re not hungry?”

“I don’t feel like eating.”

Levana began walking.

Earlier that day, she had eaten a massive amount of desserts at Delight, and later, Ariel's macarons and milk. She didn't think she could eat anything more; she might even throw up if she did.

"But, Saintess, you haven't eaten in days. It might harm your health."

"It's fine. I can heal myself."

"Are you... upset about something?"

"Andersen."

Levana looked at him with a gentle smile.

"I experienced a new world today. I no longer crave the cathedral's food. As you said, I plan to adopt a more modest diet. Since it's late, I'll have a modest breakfast tomorrow morning."

Hearing Levana's words, Andersen looked thoughtful.

Usually, after prayer, Levana would come out starving, complaining and devouring her food. But today, she seemed like a completely different person, as if she had achieved enlightenment overnight.

"...I understand now."

Andersen nodded.

"You've been to that place, haven't you?"

"Huh?"

Levana's eyes widened in surprise. Did he know about her going out for a massive dessert binge?

Andersen continued, "There's a story that devout prayer in the sanctuary can lead the saintess to a spiritual realm. There have been several cases of this in the past. Saint Christina, for instance... after praying in the sanctuary, she would emerge radiant and lose all desire for food, having transcended bodily desires. She would spend

all her days praying without leaving the sanctuary. Perhaps you are experiencing the same state?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Levana nodded quickly.

“I’ve completely transcended physical desires. I seek only divine love and grace. So, no need for food. I’ll head to my room to rest.”

Levana walked away hurriedly, feeling a slight pang of guilt for lying as a saintess.

‘...Is this going to be a problem?’

‘...No, Senior Christina told plenty of lies, after all. It shouldn’t be an issue, right? Even if it is, I don’t care. I’m going out again tomorrow. No one will disturb me as long as I pretend to be praying in the sanctuary. Hehe, maybe I’ll visit that bakery again.’

Unaware of Levana’s thoughts, Andersen watched her with a content smile.

Meanwhile, at the cathedral entrance, Ariel was preparing to make her next move.

Chapter 89 : The Saint (5)

A holy barrier surrounded the cathedral.

Anyone without sacred power couldn't pass through it; if a normal person tried, they would be thrown back.

This divine protection had safeguarded the cathedral from external threats for centuries... yet it would be ineffective against Ariel.

With her abilities, Ariel could easily tear the holy barrier apart like paper using pure strength alone.

But doing so would cause an uproar : cries of "The Demon Lord's army is attacking!" would echo, and every paladin in the cathedral, as well as the empire's entire force—including its heroes—would be deployed to stop her.

While none of them could truly stop Ariel, it would cause chaos in the empire's capital and worsen the situation.

This was not what Ariel wanted. She simply wanted to peacefully convince the saintess and quietly return to the dragon's lair.

Therefore, Ariel pondered how to enter the cathedral without breaking the holy barrier.

Though the barrier encompassed the entire cathedral, there wasn't a single gap.

The entrance was accessible to common worshippers and even merchants providing food and supplies, as long as they passed inspection. In other words, there was no barrier at the entrance.

The paladins guarded the entrance closely, but that part didn't pose a problem for Ariel.

The solution was simple: to pass through the open entrance faster than they could detect.

Yet, Ariel preferred a legitimate approach, just as she did when passing through the capital gates.

She valued the exchange that came with following the rules of each place; it was one of the small joys of adventure.

However, Ariel had no way to prove her identity, nor anyone to vouch for her, nor any legitimate reason to enter the cathedral.

Since an official approach was impossible, the only method left was to enter without creating a disturbance: by running incredibly fast.

She would slip through faster than the paladins could notice.

Ariel crouched and waited, ready to dash the moment the cathedral door opened. Soon, the door opened, and people emerged—clergymen who had finished their prayers in the chapel.

Whoosh!

In a flash, something blurred past them unnoticed.

The clergymen continued chatting peacefully, and the paladins maintained their watchful stances. Everything was as peaceful as ever at the cathedral's entrance.

Ariel, who had breezed through like a gust of wind, arrived at the fountain in the courtyard.

Moonlight bathed the beautifully sculpted fountain, where water flowed softly.

Ariel glanced around, satisfied at her successful entry. Now, she just needed to find where the saintess was...

“Ah, the prayers for this year have been completed safely.”

Voices echoed nearby. Ariel turned to see two elderly priests talking as they walked.

“Indeed. Not only for us, but I’m sure the saintess must have struggled as well. She’s likely spent days in the sanctuary without food, dedicating herself wholly to prayer.”

“Yes, it couldn’t have been easy. We can only thank her for her devotion.”

Ariel stood beside the statue, waiting for them to pass. Fortunately, it seemed neither priest had noticed her.

“We owe our peaceful lives to the saintess. More people should know this, but when I see the declining number of believers these days... Hmm?”

One priest suddenly stopped and turned toward Ariel’s direction.

But by then, Ariel was already gone.

“What’s wrong?”

“I thought I saw something here...”

“There’s nothing. Perhaps you’re seeing things?”

“Haha, maybe so. I was deeply engrossed in prayer today....”

The priests resumed walking, and Ariel slowly emerged from behind the statue. She had quickly hidden there when the priest turned.

Although she wasn’t caught, she found this whole sneaking around tiring. She needed to find the saintess quickly and return to the dragon’s lair.

Ariel moved through the cathedral, searching for the saintess.

“...Hey, did you see something just now?”

“Huh? See what?”

“Something white seemed to pass by...”

“I didn’t see anything.”

Ariel passed by clergymen and paladins occasionally, but her speed was such that they could only register a faint curiosity, unable to truly see her.

Eventually, Ariel found a room that seemed to be the saintess's.

At the end of the cathedral corridor, there was a large door adorned with holy symbols on either side.

Two paladins stood guard by the door.

These paladins seemed different from the others—more disciplined, their expressions tense and without a single gap in their stance.

It seemed likely that someone important was behind that door—perhaps the saintess.

Ariel pushed off the ground and dashed toward the paladins.

The paladins, spotting her, reached for their swords, but Ariel was faster.

She struck each on the head with a hand chop, rendering them unconscious.

She'd held back, so they wouldn't die, but they wouldn't wake up immediately either.

Feeling a bit guilty, Ariel took some gold coins from her inventory and placed a handful on each of the paladins.

It felt a bit strange, hitting someone and then paying them, but it was the least she could do.

Ariel approached the door, hoping the saintess would be inside.

“Stop right there.”

A chilling voice sounded from behind.

Ariel turned to see an elderly man with white hair standing at the end of the corridor.

He wore splendid armor, clearly distinct from that of the other paladins, intricately etched with sacred symbols.

A fierce spiked mace hung at his waist, and a sturdy shield was strapped to his back.

“I knew there was a disturbance in the cathedral, and it turns out there was a rat scurrying around.”

The old man began striding toward Ariel.

Though he wasn't particularly large or imposing, his eyes shone intensely, evoking the presence of a seasoned warrior.

“Targeting the saintess... I see, you must be a demon.”

Ariel considered his words. Targeting the saintess? Did this mean the saintess was indeed behind that door?

“A demon daring to intrude upon this holy cathedral. Did you truly think it would be so easy?”

A golden aura burst forth from the old man, filling the corridor with a brilliance like sunlight.

“Not that it matters.”

Before Ariel knew it, the man had approached her, wielding a spiked mace in one hand and a shield in the other.

“You'll meet your end here.”

The next instant, the spiked mace came crashing down toward Ariel's head.

Ariel pondered her options.

She could use telekinesis, erect a shield, or simply catch the mace with her bare hands; any of these would suffice.

However, something felt off.

The mace's descent was far from threatening. It wobbled and slowly

dropped toward her as if it lacked weight.

Ariel took a single step back, dodging the blow effortlessly.

“Oh? To evade my strike... you’re no ordinary being.”

The old man called it a “strike,” yet even a child could’ve dodged it, given how wobbly and slow it was.

Ariel glanced at the mace in the old man’s hand. It didn’t seem real. It looked as though it were made of fabric.

“Come, now. I shall grant you the privilege of attacking me.”

The old man lifted his shield and declared. But the shield, too, was fake—its edges frayed as if sewn from cloth.

Ariel continued to stand, observing him in silence.

“Draw your sword, honorable knight,” the old man urged.

First calling her a demon, now an honorable knight—it felt like a joke, but his expression was entirely serious.

“Show me the spirit of an honorable knight.”

Ariel sighed and unsheathed Ragnarok from her back.

Chapter 90 : The Saint (6)

Screech.

With a cold metallic sound, Ragnarok was drawn, its silvery blade bathed in moonlight, exuding a chilling aura.

“Ohhh.”

The old man was awestruck.

“As expected, the legendary sword granted by the gods. Facing its grandeur makes my blood boil with excitement. Come at me. Wielding that sword means you must have the qualification and skill.”

The old man raised his shield higher.

“But no matter who you are, can you really pierce Aegis, the shield that has withstood a thousand years of fate?”

Ariel watched the old man quietly.

His face was filled with a solemn expression, as if he were a hero facing his final battle.

“Our long struggle is about to end. After tonight, one of us will no longer walk this earth. But do not worry. Our duel tonight will be recorded in history.”

Ariel felt a wave of dizziness.

A legendary sword and a long struggle?

Ariel's Ragnarok was merely a sword crafted by Lionel, who had imitated a dwarf's craftsmanship. And this was her first encounter with this old man.

By now, it was almost certain—the old man was not in his right mind. His sponge-like mace and fake shield were already absurd. Even his armor, emitting a golden glow, seemed dubious.

Ariel's gaze flickered slightly as she realized it wasn't even armor the old man wore. It was merely clothing made to look like armor, complete with a button in the center.

His oversized shoulders sagged awkwardly. And that golden glow? It was probably as fake as Ragnarok's red aura.

"What are you waiting for? Attack already. Don't tell me you're afraid, Zarkan?"

Zarkan? Who's Zarkan?

In the end, Ariel swung Ragnarok, moving at an incredibly slow pace.

Whoosh.

Ragnarok tapped against the old man's shield. Ariel noticed the shield's surface give slightly, like a sponge, confirming her suspicions—it was a toy shield.

If Ariel hadn't restrained her strength, the shield would've torn, scattering its stuffing everywhere.

"Kahahaha!"

The old man beamed, thinking he had blocked her attack.

"My Aegis truly is remarkable. Blocking the legendary sword... what a difference in level, Belegor! Now it's my turn. Try to dodge this like before."

The old man stepped forward, swinging his mace.

Although he appeared to be swinging with all his might, his shaking arm suggested even the act of swinging was difficult. The cloth mace lightly tapped Ariel's forehead.

In truth, it was barely a tap; it was more of a gentle touch.

“Haha, you couldn’t dodge this time. Is this the end for you? No... I see. You haven’t been using your full strength, have you? Tell me, Nekrovanus, why are you holding back?”

“Get serious now. You’re the only opponent I acknowledge. If you don’t go all out, our duel tonight will be...”

“I’ll get serious.”

Ariel raised Ragnarok high.

It seemed the only way to end this farce was to play along with the old man.

“Blaze, Ragnarok.”

A crimson light radiated from Ragnarok. The sinister glow of ruin coiled around its silver blade like a snake.

“Oh, ohhh!”

The old man’s eyes sparkled.

“It truly is a cursed sword! The chaos sword that will bring the world to ruin! How magnificent!”

Grinning like a child, the old man dropped his mace and shield. Ariel began chanting in a low voice.

“Scarlet flames awakened from the darkness, spread your wings of judgment and burn my enemy....”

“O-ohhh!!”

The old man’s face lit up with excitement.

The more Ariel exaggerated her spell, the more thrilled he became, unable to contain his joy.

“Yes, that’s it! Show me all your power!”

In the old man’s eyes, a fierce determination to withstand Ariel’s attack shone. Ariel continued her chant.

“O flames of chaos, stained in blood...”

Ariel began to float in midair, using telekinesis.

“Release your true might and unseal the power of a thousand years....”

She flew slowly towards the old man, stopping before him and lowering Ragnarok at an agonizingly slow pace.

“Devour, Ragnarok.”

“Haaargh!”

The old man let out a spirited shout, raising his shield.

Ragnarok moved slowly, touching the old man’s shield. The crimson aura vanished from the sword, and it spun, flung down the corridor by telekinesis.

“Kahaha!”

The old man burst out laughing.

“Is that all your power? Impressive, but it still couldn’t pierce my Aegis! Now it’s my turn! Prepare for divine judgment!”

He swung his mace.

“Divine Smasher!”

Thunk.

A feeble impact brushed Ariel’s side. Still, Ariel let out a scream.

“Aaagh.”

She collapsed onto the floor, closing her eyes and lying still.

The old man wiped the sweat from his brow and looked down at her.

“Our long battle is finally over. Rest in peace. I will remember your courage and determination. Though you lost to me, you were a truly

noble hero....”

“What’s going on, Bishop Javier?”

A clear and gentle voice rang out.

The old man turned, and Ariel opened her eyes a bit.

The door had opened, revealing a young girl standing there.

It was the saintess, Levana.

Levana blinked at the sight of Javier.

Hearing the commotion outside, she’d opened the door to find the elder bishop, Javier, clad in glowing gold armor, panting heavily.

Sweat dripped from his brow, and exhaustion was evident in his expression.

Once an archbishop who had led the cathedral, he now served as an elder bishop, offering guidance and spiritual support to the younger clergy.

...Or so the official story went.

In truth, Javier had stepped down because his memory and judgment had begun to fade with age.

To preserve his honor, the cathedral had given him the title of elder bishop, but he didn’t even remember being an archbishop.

Javier believed himself to be a noble knight, painting armor patterns on his robes, patrolling the cathedral each night with a cloth mace at his waist and a shield stuffed with wood and cotton on his back.

There were even rumors that he carried enchanted items inside his clothes, giving off a golden glow, which now appeared to be true.

Levana’s face showed a hint of sadness.

She felt sorrow whenever she saw Javier, mistaking himself as an honorable knight.

Javier patrolled the cathedral every night, and though people initially tried to stop him, they couldn't dissuade him from his "duty." Now, they simply watched over him, ensuring he wouldn't get hurt.

Everyone respected him, honoring his title as elder bishop, and Levana would always greet him warmly, saying, "Hello, Bishop Javier. Thanks to you, I feel safe each night. I'm always grateful."

Today, however, the scene was unusual.

Levana glanced around.

Two paladins, who usually guarded her door, lay unconscious on the floor. These were the dependable paladins assigned to protect her, some of the best in the cathedral.

Someone else was lying in front of Javier, dressed like an adventurer. Though she didn't recognize them, they seemed harmless, lying still and unmoving.

Levana approached Javier.

She wiped the sweat from his forehead with her sleeve and looked down at the person lying on the floor.

"?!"

Levana's eyes widened in surprise.

"A-Ariel?"

The figure on the floor was none other than Ariel.

"Haha."

Beside her, Javier spoke in a proud tone.

"Do not worry, Saintess. I have defeated this intruder. You are safe now..."

Javier's voice trailed off, and he stumbled.

"Bishop Javier!"

Levana tried to support him, but it was too late. Javier collapsed, his fake mace and shield clattering to the floor.

"H-Bishop Javier!"

Javier was unconscious.

Levana quickly summoned her divine power, while Ariel slowly sat up.

Chapter 91 : The Saint (7)

When you think about it, Javier collapsing was largely due to Ariel.

This was because Ariel played her part in Javier's play too perfectly.

The red radiance of Ragnarok, the exaggeratedly dramatic incantations, the convincing telekinetic effects, and finally, the climactic scene where Ariel fell to Javier's strike...

It was nothing short of a heroic and villainous climactic battle.

Javier, overly immersed in the performance, couldn't contain his heightened emotions and ended up fainting.

He passed out from sheer joy.

"Hmm... It doesn't seem dangerous. It's just temporary loss of consciousness..."

Levana observed Javier's condition and spoke.

A saint is a being blessed by the divine.

They instinctively discern good and evil in people and can even gain some insight into emotions and physical conditions.

From Levana's perspective, Javier was not in any serious danger. With rest, he would soon regain consciousness.

"We should move him to a bed first. Leaving him here might give him a cold."

Levana grabbed under Javier's arms and tried to drag him to her room.

Of course, it didn't work very well. Levana was far too frail to move a

person with physical strength alone.

Seeing her struggle, Ariel cast a telekinesis spell.

Javier's body floated gently into the air, making Levana flinch.

But then she remembered that Ariel was an adventurer and quickly understood.

She figured it must have been some kind of magic.

Ariel used telekinesis to move Javier into Levana's room.

Levana's room had a neat and tidy feel to it. There were no extravagant or luxurious decorations, just a few humble pieces of furniture.

"Thank you, Ariel. Can you lay Bishop Javier on the bed?"

As she spoke, Levana quickly tidied up the dolls on her bed.

There were three in total, all dragon-shaped with adorable wings and tails.

They were likely the ones Levana hugged while sleeping.

Seeing the dragon dolls, a flicker of greed flashed in Ariel's eyes.

"...Ariel?"

But when Levana called out, Ariel snapped out of it and carefully laid Javier on the bed.

Levana approached Javier, closed her eyes, and gently placed her hand on his forehead.

"Vitalize."

A sacred light emanated from Levana's hand.

The light carried a warm energy, soothing just by its presence.

That holy and warm light slowly seeped into Javier's body, and soon

his face relaxed into peacefulness.

The holy magic, Vitalize.

It didn't heal wounds but improved blood circulation, calmed the mind and body, and helped restore vitality.

Levana then cast Purification to cleanse Javier's body, after which she reached into his clothing and retrieved something.

It was a pendant necklace radiating a dazzling golden glow.

The reason Javier's body had glowed golden in the hallway earlier was due to this.

Levana pressed her hand firmly against the mana stone embedded in the pendant.

The golden glow emanating from the pendant vanished instantly.

"This is a pendant used for prayers in the chapel... So he was carrying it in his clothes."

Originally, this pendant was meant to be hung from the chapel ceiling, casting a golden radiance to create a holy atmosphere.

Aside from that effect, it didn't have much practical use unless hung in a chapel.

But to use it this way...

Levana murmured, looking at the sleeping Javier.

"Bishop Javier, you might be a genius..."

"..."

Ariel pretended not to hear and turned her gaze back to Levana's dragon dolls.

"Bishop Javier will be fine now."

Levana pulled the blanket up to Javier's neck, then turned to face the

Holy Knights collapsed near the door.

“Ariel, could you move them to the room as well?”

Momentarily lost in thought while staring at the dragon dolls, Ariel nodded with an “Ah.”

Using telekinesis again, she transported the Holy Knights into the room.

According to Levana, the knights weren't in any critical condition either.

They only had a few lumps on their heads but were otherwise unharmed.

A simple healing spell would soon have them back on their feet.

Levana retrieved spare bedding from a drawer and spread it on the floor, asking Ariel to lay the knights there.

Ariel carefully placed the Holy Knights on the bedding Levana had prepared, and Levana cast holy magic once more.

“Healing.”

While Levana healed the knights, Ariel telekinetically retrieved the Ragnarok she had flung down the hallway earlier and strapped it back onto her back.

“Done.”

Levana dusted off her hands and looked at Ariel.

“Now, shall we talk?”

Frankly, when Ariel had first parted ways with Levana, she thought of her as nothing more than a wandering vagrant.

Levana's robe had been too shabby, and she had no money.

Thus, when Ariel encountered Levana again here, she was inwardly quite surprised.

And when Javier addressed Levana as “Saint,” she felt as though fate was playing tricks on her.

For a moment, she thought meeting Levana in Delight might not have been mere coincidence, but she quickly dismissed the idea.

After all, Ariel had only gone to Delight to enjoy dessert.

She wasn’t someone prone to overthinking coincidences as acts of fate.

In any case, it was fortunate that Levana was a saint.

It would be easier to persuade someone she had befriended earlier than a complete stranger.

“So, why have you come to see me, Ariel?” asked Levana.

Ariel was about to explain the situation regarding Lakia’s mother.

“Ugh...”

At that moment, the Holy Knights lying on the floor regained consciousness.

Though they didn’t overreact upon seeing that Levana was safe, their expressions hardened when they saw Ariel.

Levana quickly explained that Ariel was just her friend, but the knights didn’t seem convinced.

Still, they didn’t question the Saint’s words.

In the cathedral, the authority of a Saint was on par with the highest Archbishop.

If a Saint said so, then that was that.

“Uh...”

Ariel hesitantly approached the two knights.

“About earlier, I’m sor—”

But the knights flinched, recoiled, and stared at Ariel with fearful eyes.

Feeling rejected, Ariel had to step back.

Levana, watching this, looked utterly baffled.

For the cathedral's elite knights to cower like this... What exactly had Ariel done to them?

"...Then we'll resume our guard duties. Please call us if anything happens, Saint."

"All right. Thank you."

The knights left the room, muttering something about gold coins as they closed the door.

Levana turned back to Ariel.

"So, why have you come to see me, Ariel?"

"Well..."

Ariel began explaining the situation about Lakia's mother.

It was about whether the Saint could dispel the dark magic cast by a high-ranking officer of the Demon King's army.

"Hmm. I'm not sure... I've never tried something like that. Do you think I'd be able to?"

At Levana's question, Ariel shrugged.

She didn't know either.

The only certainty was that Levana was their last hope.

"Besides, going to heal that dragon would mean leaving the cathedral... The Archbishop wouldn't permit it. Unless it's a matter of humanity's survival, a Saint isn't allowed to leave the cathedral."

Ariel silently stared at Levana.

Levana's cheeks turned slightly red.

"...Earlier today, I just snuck out. I happened to discover a secret passage."

Ariel averted her gaze and focused on the dragon dolls again.

She gently wiggled the tail of one of them using telekinesis.

It wasn't that she was distracted during the conversation.

She wasn't coveting the dragon dolls.

She was just giving Levana time to think.

"Well, if I can return within a day, it might be okay. I can pretend to spend the entire day praying in the sanctuary. As long as it doesn't go beyond a day, it shouldn't be a problem."

"A day is enough."

Ariel pulled out a teleport scroll from her inventory.

With this, they could head straight to the dragon's lair and return quickly using telekinetic flight.

Not that Levana would be thrilled about that.

"All right, I'll try. But I have one request."

At Levana's words, Ariel tilted her head.

"A request?"

"Yeah."

Levana stepped closer and stared directly at Ariel.

"Ah."

Ariel nodded and pulled out a macaron from her inventory.

She placed it in Levana's mouth.

Nom nom.

Levana chewed happily, a blissful expression on her face.

But soon her expression changed.

“No, that’s not what I meant. It’s delicious, but...”

“My request is this.”

Levana smiled slightly as she spoke.

“Be my guardian knight, Ariel.”

Chapter 92 : The Saint (8)

The Knight Protector of the Saint is an entity tasked with safeguarding and defending the Saint.

Through a sacred covenant, the Saint can choose their protector, and the chosen knight is granted two special abilities.

The first ability is Divine Transcendence.

This power allows the knight to convert mana into divine energy, enabling the use of holy magic.

However, due to the rapid consumption of mana during the conversion process, knights in the past rarely utilized this ability.

It was more efficient to protect the Saint using their mana directly.

The second ability is Divine Leap.

This enables the knight to instantly move to the Saint's location upon receiving their will, transcending space and time to reach the Saint no matter where they are.

This ability ensures the Saint is always under the knight's protection, even in dire situations.

Legendary Holy Knight Alaric described the protector as “a being that pierces through the darkness like a ray of light to guard the Saint.”

The Saint may only choose one protector in their lifetime, and this choice is sealed by a divine covenant.

Once made, it cannot be undone, binding the two together until death.

Hence, the decision to form this bond is taken with utmost caution.

“What do you think, Ariel?”

Having finished her explanation, Levana turned to Ariel.

“I hope you’ll become my protector. Of course, this is just a personal request. Even if you refuse, I’ll still go to heal the dragon... But I really hope you’ll agree.”

Levana spoke cautiously, fidgeting with the hem of her robe.

Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes glistened slightly.

For someone born a Saint, choosing a protector was a destined obligation.

Typically, the Church selected the most outstanding Holy Knight for the role.

However, Levana wished to make this choice herself.

She instinctively sensed Ariel’s goodness—she was the kindest person she had ever met.

Moreover, she was strong.

Even the most skilled Holy Knights of the Church couldn’t match Ariel.

She had already effortlessly subdued the two knights guarding Levana’s chamber, rendering further debate unnecessary.

Most importantly, Levana had a decisive reason for wanting Ariel as her protector: her appearance.

To Levana, Ariel looked irresistibly adorable.

She desperately wished to spend her life with her.

Meanwhile, Ariel had already made up her mind.

She would become the Saint’s protector.

From her perspective, this was a great opportunity.

The ability to convert mana into divine energy and use holy magic?

That meant she could use all the spells Levana had demonstrated earlier, including the purification magic “Purification.”

With that spell, she wouldn’t need to bother with bathing anymore.

Not that Ariel disliked bathing, but there were times when it felt like a chore.

‘Imagine using that spell then...’

A smile spread across Ariel’s face.

This was the true utility of magic—enhancing quality of life, not just burning enemies.

“I’ll be your protector.”

Levana’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Really? Ariel, thank you!”

She threw her arms around Ariel.

Nestled in Levana’s embrace, Ariel spoke.

“But I have a request too.”

“A request? What is it? Tell me, Ariel. I’ll do anything for you.”

“That.”

Ariel pointed casually.

“I’d like you to sell me one of those.”

She gestured toward a dragon plushie from earlier.

Levana immediately nodded.

“Sure. They’re my favorite, but since I have three, you can have one. Take whichever you like.”

“Thanks.”

Using telekinesis, Ariel lifted the middle plushie.

She made it flap its wings as it floated toward her.

“That one’s named Sparky,” Levana said, pointing to the plushie.

Ariel gently tapped its nose and murmured, “Sparky.”

He couldn’t wait to show Sparky to Lakia.

‘Look, I got you a friend.’

With that matter settled, it was time to proceed with the covenant.

“By the way, Ariel, the covenant ritual involves facing each other, holding ears, and kissing.”

“.....?”

Ariel squinted at Levana, her gaze saying, ‘That doesn’t seem right.’

Of course, it wasn’t.

Blushing, Levana quickly apologized.

“...Sorry. Actually, I just need to kiss your forehead. That’s all.”

Levana’s earlier claim stemmed from a mischievous desire to touch Ariel’s pointed ears and perhaps even steal a kiss.

“You can touch my ears,” Ariel said nonchalantly.

It seemed Levana was quite curious about her ears—a feeling she could understand.

She himself couldn’t resist touching a dwarf’s beard whenever she saw one.

It was an irresistible urge.

Besides, letting her touch her ears wasn’t a big deal.

She'd received a dragon plushie, gained access to holy magic, and Levana would heal Lakia's mother.

Allowing her to touch her ears felt like a small favor in return.

"Thank you!" Levana beamed, carefully reaching out.

She gently touched Ariel's ears, causing her to shiver slightly at the ticklish sensation, though it was bearable.

"Wow..."

Levana marveled as she explored her ears, her smile radiant with joy.

After a moment, she composed herself.

"Now, let's proceed with the covenant, Ariel."

"Okay."

Levana closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

A divine light enveloped them, emanating from the surroundings.

Opening her eyes, Levana gazed at Ariel.

"Under the blessing of the divine, I appoint you as my protector."

Her voice was solemn and reverent, clear and resonant as if it echoed directly in Ariel's mind.

Her demeanor had transformed completely.

The shy girl was gone, replaced by a compassionate Saint who seemed to embrace all creation.

"Will you swear to become my shield against the darkness and my sword against evil?"

Ariel nodded slightly.

Levana smiled softly and kissed her forehead—a warm and gentle gesture.

“From this moment, I imbue your soul with holy light. You shall walk beside me on the path of righteousness, safeguarding me with a noble heart and unwavering resolve. Spreading mercy and love’s light to the world is your sacred mission.”

The divine light surrounding them merged into Ariel, marking her rebirth as the Saint’s protector.

“It’s done, Ariel.”

Levana embraced her.

“From now on, we’ll be together forever.”

The next morning, Javier paraded through the cathedral, boasting about his heroic feats.

“Ha-ha! Do you know how powerful the Demon King was last night? Without me, our Saint would’ve been in grave danger! That fiend—what was his name? Noctarion! Yes, that’s it. He wielded a terrifying, blood-red demon sword...”

Javier’s tales grew increasingly extravagant.

“That Demon King? He breathed fire! But I blocked it with my bare hands and then swung my holy mace...”

The clergy around him chuckled hollowly, responding with, “Amazing, Bishop Javier,” though none took his words seriously.

In truth, there had been no intruder in the cathedral that night.

The sacred barriers and entry wards were intact.

“Hmm, but something feels odd...”

Javier murmured, frowning deeply.

“I think I saw a young elf last night—silver hair, red eyes...”

His words drew indifferent nods and murmurs of agreement.

However, two knights guarding Levana’s chamber stiffened in alarm.

They knew exactly who Javier had seen.

Still, they remained silent, honoring Levana's request to keep the matter secret.

Meanwhile, as Javier basked in his self-praise, Levana prepared to head to the sanctuary.

Archbishop Andersen trailed behind, concern etched on his face.

"Saint, are you sure you're all right? Skipping breakfast for morning prayers..."

Levana smiled gently and nodded.

"Nothing is more important than starting the day with holy prayers. Nourishing the soul comes first; the body follows. To feel God's grace is my most precious time."

With that, Levana slipped into the sanctuary, swiftly closing the door behind her.

Pressing her ear to the door, she listened for Andersen's retreating footsteps.

Once all was quiet, she opened a hidden floor panel and descended a ladder into a secret passage.

'Ariel.'

She called her protector.

Instantly, a brilliant pillar of light erupted before her.

Chapter 93 : The Saint (9)

Ariel, now a holy knight under the Saintess's blessing, could freely pass through the sacred barriers.

Though mana, not divine power, still coursed through Ariel's body, the covenant with the Saintess had imbued her soul with the grace of the divine.

In essence, the covenant acted as a sort of divine identification.

Thanks to this, Ariel didn't have to wait for the cathedral's gates to open the previous night. Instead, she simply leapt over the walls guarded by the sacred barrier to exit.

After leaving the cathedral, Ariel wandered aimlessly around the heart of the empire.

Her plan to travel to the dragon's lair with Levana would commence at dawn.

When morning came, Levana would pretend to offer prayers in the sanctuary, then call Ariel.

Ariel would then use the holy knight's ability, "Divine Leap," to reach Levana, and together, they would tear a teleportation scroll to head to the dragon's lair.

This was to ensure the archbishop wouldn't discover that Levana had left the cathedral.

While waiting for dawn, Ariel experimented with various divine spells.

She found that as long as she converted her mana into divine power, she could wield all kinds of holy magic freely.

Unlike regular magic, which required practice or at least an attempt to mimic learning, divine spells came naturally.

This, too, seemed to be a privilege granted through the covenant.

The knowledge of divine magic had been seamlessly ingrained in Ariel's being, enabling her to fulfill her role as a holy knight.

If so, did she truly need Levana's help?

Perhaps Ariel could simply convert her mana to divine power and break the dark spell cast on Lakia's mother herself.

The thought crossed her mind, but Ariel ultimately decided to rely on Levana.

There might be aspects only the Saintess could handle.

Before she knew it, the sun was rising.

Having thoroughly tested her divine magic, Ariel now played with her dragon doll, Sparky.

Using telekinesis, she made Sparky flit through the air, flap its wings, and wag its tail as if it were alive.

Sparky performed somersaults, flattened itself to the ground as if running, and displayed various playful antics.

To an onlooker, it might have seemed like mere child's play, but Ariel saw it differently.

This was, without a doubt, magical training.

Practicing telekinesis while bonding with Sparky was a meaningful endeavor.

Sparky soared high into the air, spinning before plummeting and landing atop Ariel's head.

"Ariel."

It was then that Levana called her.

Levana's voice echoed softly in Ariel's mind.

Ariel tucked Sparky into her inventory and stood up.

Closing her eyes, a portal of radiant light appeared in her mind.

It shimmered brightly, like an entrance to another world.

Stepping through it would surely take her to Levana.

Without hesitation, Ariel stepped into the portal.

With a flash of blinding light, Ariel appeared.

With a large sword strapped to her back, she gazed expressionlessly at Levana.

"Ariel, you really came!" Levana beamed with joy.

It was her first time summoning a holy knight, and she felt an inexplicable thrill.

Ariel's presence brought her immense comfort, but unexpectedly, tears began to stream down Levana's cheeks.

"Why... Why am I crying all of a sudden...?"

Though overjoyed by Ariel's arrival, Levana couldn't help but weep.

Perhaps it was the heavy burden and loneliness she'd silently endured.

Life as the Saintess was never easy.

The overwhelming responsibilities placed on her at a young age.

The constant pressure to remain devout and virtuous.

She hadn't chosen this path, yet she had to endure and sacrifice so much simply because she was born as the Saintess.

She couldn't enjoy simple pleasures or confide in friends.

Everything had to be endured alone.

But not anymore.

Now, she had Ariel—a steadfast support.

The holy knight was more than just a protector; they were a companion for her soul.

Overwhelmed by relief and joy, Levana wept.

Ariel stepped closer to the sniffing Levana.

Today, Levana wore a pristine white Saintess robe.

Its luxurious silk exterior shimmered softly, and its edges were embroidered with golden patterns.

It was a stark contrast to the shabby robes from before or the plain nightgown from the previous evening.

Her attire exuded a sanctity that commanded respect.

The very image of someone born under divine blessings.

Yet this Saintess now wept pitifully.

Ariel didn't understand why Levana was crying, but she wanted to comfort her.

She gently embraced Levana and patted her back.

When she'd done this in the alley before, Levana had calmed down quickly.

Levana sobbed even harder for a moment before eventually leaning her face against Ariel and regaining her composure.

Ariel pulled out a macaron from her inventory and floated it toward Levana's face using telekinesis.

Levana let out a small laugh and opened her mouth.

The macaron disappeared into her mouth.

Chewing it, Levana smiled faintly, the sweetness melting her sadness away.

It wasn't a grand gesture, but Ariel's simple act of kindness was enough to bring comfort.

Levana's face lit up with a happy smile, her sorrow dissipating.

After wiping her tears, Levana spoke with renewed determination.

"Let's go. To the dragon's lair."

In a magical hot spring filled with warm steam, a stout dwarf stood naked before a large mirror hanging on the wall.

The dwarf with a golden beard was Lionel.

Lionel stared at his reflection with a determined expression.

"Impressive. Truly extraordinary."

Lionel had been in high spirits lately.

Not only had he found a cure for his mother's illness, but Ariel had also praised the sword he'd crafted.

For a dwarf artisan who dedicated his soul to weapon-making, it was the highest compliment.

"Ragnarok... A weapon unlike any other..."

Lionel swayed his shoulders with pride.

The sword he'd crafted might rival the legendary blade Excalibur.

Though his mother and Lakia didn't seem to realize it, Ariel clearly did.

That must be why she had earnestly requested the sword.

"Indeed, it's a masterpiece."

Lionel began humming and dancing in front of the mirror.

His plump body swayed gracefully, and his rounded hips wiggled with energy.

Though he was naked, the magical hot spring was deserted, so he danced freely.

As his movements grew more exuberant, his short arms waved elegantly, and he twirled around.

He ended his dance with a spin, hands raised above his head.

“Truly, even my dance skills are extraordinary...”

Suddenly, something soft tapped Lionel’s cheek.

Startled, he turned to see a dragon doll flapping its wings in midair.

“Ack!”

Lionel stumbled back, only to realize it was just a doll.

A mischievous dragon doll stared at him.

“What is this...?”

Lionel frowned in confusion.

How was a doll flying and flapping its wings?

Then, a dreadful realization dawned upon him.

Slowly, he turned his gaze to the corner of the hot spring.

There stood two girls.

One was Ariel, and the other wore a Saintess’s robe.

“Hello.”

Ariel greeted him with a small smile, while the Saintess looked on with wide, astonished eyes.

There was no doubt.

They had seen everything.

Lionel froze, unable to speak, as if time itself had stopped.

“Let’s go,” Ariel said, walking away with the Saintess, followed by the flapping dragon doll.

Left alone, Lionel collapsed to the ground, overwhelmed by a sense of loss.

Covering his face with his hands, he let out a loud wail.

“Aaaah!”

Thus marked an unforgettable, mortifying moment in Lionel’s long life.

Chapter 94 : The Saint (10)

Ariel held Levana in her arms and tore the teleportation scroll.

Rip!

As the scroll was torn, a dazzling light erupted, flooding the space around them.

The intense flash made Ariel and Levana instinctively close their eyes. When they opened them again, they were standing in an entirely different place.

The air carried a faint warmth, and the sensation against their skin was comfortably soothing.

Ariel raised her gaze.

Before them was a massive hot spring, steam rising in thick clouds above it.

The emerald-colored water shimmered, surrounded by a flowing aura of blue mana.

The hot spring exuded a mysterious, magical atmosphere—it was the enchanted hot spring in a dragon's lair.

Ariel had been here before. It was the place where she had once watched Lionel bathe.

At that time, Lionel had blushed furiously and yelled at Ariel to leave.

And now, Lionel was here again.

For some reason, he was dancing in front of a large mirror.

His short and stocky body wiggled and swayed in a manner both absurd and endearing.

“...?”

Levana’s eyes widened at the unexpected sight, while Ariel smiled faintly.

Even if she wanted to stop Lionel, he seemed far too immersed in his own dancing to be interrupted.

All they could do was enjoy the spectacle.

Moments later, Lionel placed both hands atop his head and spun awkwardly to conclude his performance.

Then the dance ended.

Ariel used her telekinesis to send a small dragon figurine, Sparky, to tap Lionel on the cheek.

“Argh!”

Lionel screamed in surprise and slowly turned to face Ariel and Levana.

Ariel greeted him with a casual “Hello,” but Lionel ignored her.

He froze as if time had stopped, his pupils quivering as though an earthquake had shaken his very being.

Ariel pondered for a moment.

She needed to inform Lionel about the malfunction with Ragnarok.

But now didn’t seem like the right time.

Lionel was, after all, stark naked.

“Let’s go.”

Ariel took Levana’s hand, and they walked away.

A few moments later—

“AAARGH!”

Lionel’s anguished scream echoed behind them.

A short distance away, Ariel saw Lakia standing before ElySION, Lakia’s mother.

Lakia wore the body of a rabbit costume and was seated before ElySION, maintaining a barrier to prevent the spread of dark magic.

Nearby, the rabbit costume’s head lay discarded, with Lu fast asleep on top of it.

Empty bottles of fruit wine littered the area—evidence that Lu had indulged heavily and passed out in a drunken stupor.

As for Ghost and Black, they were nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, Lady Ariel! You’re here?”

Lakia greeted Ariel with a bright smile.

Ariel nodded and approached Lakia, with Levana hesitantly trailing behind.

Levana’s gaze fixed on the figure lying down—ElySION.

‘A d-dragon...!’

Even in her polymorphed state, Levana’s saintly intuition could immediately tell that ElySION was a dragon.

Not only ElySION, but the child-like figure in the rabbit suit, and even the dwarf who had been dancing naked earlier—all of them were dragons.

“Hmm, so this little one is the humans’ saint?”

Lakia pointed at Levana, who flinched and huddled closer to Ariel.

Ariel nodded in affirmation.

“That’s right.”

“She’s younger than I expected. Hey, human, can you heal my mother?”

Lakia’s golden eyes gleamed sharply as she addressed Levana.

Levana trembled in fear, meeting a dragon for the first time in her life.

Though Lakia appeared as a mere child, her overwhelming presence was a stark reminder of her identity as one of the most formidable beings in existence.

“Y-yes, I-I’ll try my best....”

Levana stammered, clinging to Ariel.

Despite having only formed a Guardian Knight pact with Ariel a day prior, Levana was already relying on her entirely.

“If you heal my mother, I’ll reward you handsomely. But if you fail...”

Lakia’s eyes glinted coldly.

“I’ll turn you to ashes!”

“!!”

Levana’s eyes widened in shock.

“Turn me to ashes... is she planning to burn me with flame magic?”

Legends told of a dragon that once wiped out an entire human kingdom overnight, leaving it as nothing but ashes.

Was this what she meant?

“Stop scaring her.”

Ariel approached Lakia and gently patted her head.

Lakia's expression softened immediately, like a pet appeased by its master.

"Hehe, I was just trying to encourage her to do her best...."

Even in her human form, Levana could tell.

If Lakia were in her true dragon form, her tail would undoubtedly be wagging in delight at Ariel's touch.

Levana was dumbfounded.

Dragons were supposed to be creatures of immense power and unparalleled majesty.

Yet here was a dragon dressed like a rabbit, behaving like a pet, and using honorifics to address Ariel.

Even with her saintly intuition, Levana couldn't decide whether to fear the dragon or Ariel, her Guardian Knight.

While she was grappling with her confusion, Lakia's tone suddenly turned cold.

"What are you standing around for, human? Heal my mother already."

Lakia's golden eyes shone sharply, her face filled with unhidden hostility.

It was clear—Lakia didn't like Levana.

Not only was she a mere human, but her beauty and proximity to Ariel annoyed Lakia immensely.

'How dare she cling to Ariel... That spot belongs to me!'

In short, Lakia was jealous.

She believed that being by Ariel's side was her rightful place. Seeing Levana occupy that position filled her with anger.

Meanwhile, Levana trembled.

As a saint, she could feel the full extent of Lakia's jealousy and malice.

Sweat poured down her forehead, and her hands shook with fear and tension.

At this rate, she might faint before she could even begin healing Elysion.

Ariel intervened.

"We'll wait outside," she said to Lakia.

"But... But what if—?"

"If we stay, we might get in the way."

Ariel's firm tone left no room for argument.

Lakia hesitated, glancing at her mother.

The thought of leaving Elysion alone made her uneasy.

"Let's trust Levana."

In the end, Lakia relented. Ariel's words carried absolute authority for her.

"All right, human." Lakia turned to Levana.

"Don't let anything happen to my mother. Understand?"

"Y-yes... I'll do my best...."

With her face pale and voice shaking, Levana answered.

Ariel led Lakia and the drunken Lu out of the room, leaving only Levana and Elysion behind.

Levana took deep breaths to calm her racing heart.

Ariel had taken Lakia away, which was a huge relief. If Lakia had stayed, Levana might have fainted from the sheer pressure of her

presence.

Her heart still pounded wildly.

Gathering her resolve, Levana approached Elysion.

Elysion, in her elven form, had dark, ominous spots marring her otherwise beautiful face.

‘This is...!’

Levana felt the powerful presence of a curse—dark magic so potent it made her skin prickle.

‘Who could have cast such a terrible curse...?’

The dark magic was devouring Elysion’s life force, and even a dragon wouldn’t survive if it continued.

‘To cast a curse of this magnitude, it must have been someone like a Demon King’s general....’

Her guess was correct.

The curse was forbidden dark magic cast by the Demon Army general, Baalberith, at the cost of his own life.

Ordinary holy magic would never be enough to dispel it.

A miracle—a saint’s divine authority—was required.

Levana knelt and clasped her hands in prayer.

‘Focus. You must save her.’

As her determination ignited, a faint white light began to glow around her.

This was no ordinary healing.

This was a miracle.

Chapter 95 : Evergreen Forest

(1)

Ariel stepped aside to let Levana heal Elysion in peace, deciding to visit Ghost and Black.

She heard that Ghost and Black were spending time in a place called the 'Evergreen Forest.'

The Evergreen Forest was a magical forest Elysion had created as a hobby.

A harmonious sanctuary where various animals and plants thrived without the presence of monsters or magical beasts.

Additionally, no humans, dwarves, elves, or lizardmen resided there, making it a serene and peaceful forest with no risk of interspecies conflicts.

"I've loved the Evergreen Forest since I was a child. Someday, when I have my own lair, I want to create a forest as beautiful as this," Lakia said, her eyes sparkling.

The forest was so vast that it wasn't within a dragon's lair.

Instead, a teleportation portal leading to it had been established.

A short while later, guided by Lakia, Ariel arrived at the teleportation portal leading to the Evergreen Forest.

The portal swirled as if alive, emanating a faint, mystical blue light.

While Ariel marveled at the portal, Lakia asked from beside her, "By the way, Ariel, what's with that thing?"

Lakia pointed at the dragon doll flapping its wings by her side.

Ariel smiled brightly and replied, “It’s your friend.”

“M-My friend?”

“Yes. Its name is Sparky.”

Lakia glanced again at the dragon doll, Sparky.

Under normal circumstances, she would have yelled, ‘Stop messing around, you little doll!’ and ripped it apart, scattering its stuffing everywhere. But she couldn’t bring herself to do that in front of Ariel.

“...Nice to meet you, Sparky. I’m Lakia,” Lakia greeted awkwardly.

Sparky waved its stubby little arms in response. Of course, it was Ariel’s telekinesis at work.

“...Well then, Ariel, shall we head to the Evergreen Forest? Ghost and Black are probably waiting for you,” Lakia said.

Ariel nodded and stepped into the portal without hesitation.

Whoosh!

A peculiar sensation engulfed Ariel’s entire body.

It felt as though she was being shot rapidly somewhere.

Moments later, Ariel found herself standing in the Evergreen Forest.

Before her was a shimmering lakeside, where warm sunlight filtered gently through the leaves.

The smell of grass tickled her nose, and a refreshing breeze brushed her cheeks.

For some reason, her heart felt at peace.

Ariel looked around with a slightly surprised expression.

The sun and clouds in the sky were indistinguishable from reality.

To think this was all magic—it was awe-inspiring.

Walking across the grassy field, Ariel moved forward as a gentle breeze playfully tugged at her silver hair.

Soon, she saw Ghost and Black joyfully frolicking near the lakeside.

Watching over them with a warm gaze was an elderly man seated on a wooden chair.

“That old man is Gaizen,” Lakia said, having appeared beside Ariel.

“Gaizen is an elf and serves as the guardian of the Evergreen Forest. Although there are no monsters or beasts here, he primarily manages the forest. In any case, Gaizen knows more about this place than even my mother does.”

At that moment, Gaizen began walking toward them.

“Lakia, you’ve arrived.”

“Yes, Gaizen. Let me introduce Ariel. She is my mentor.”

Lakia introduced Ariel, and Gaizen bowed respectfully.

“Greetings, Ariel. I’ve heard much about you. Thank you for taking good care of Lady Lakia.”

Despite his white hair and the wrinkles of age, Gaizen was a dignified and graceful elf.

He was undoubtedly handsome, even in his advanced age. One could only imagine how much more striking he must have been in his youth.

“Gaizen, Ariel has brought the saint of humans. She has already begun healing, so I believe my mother will be safe,” Lakia said.

Relief washed over Gaizen’s face.

“Phew, that’s a great relief. I was so worried something might go wrong... Ariel, thank you so much.”

Gaizen bowed again, his eyes welling up with tears.

It was a testament to his unwavering loyalty to Elysion, whom he had served as a guardian for so long.

He sighed with visible relief.

“Oh, my beloved Lady Elysion... I’m so glad you’re safe. I can’t wait to see your lovely face again...”

But Gaizen’s following words made Ariel pause in her thoughts.

‘So, the two of them were a thing. No wonder Elysion also took the form of an elf.’

Whoosh!

Suddenly, Ghost and Black rushed toward Ariel.

Ariel spread her arms wide and was promptly tackled onto the grass by the two.

Ghost and Black began enthusiastically licking her cheeks from either side.

“Haha, they’re such lively and adorable creatures,” Gaizen remarked with a satisfied smile as Ariel reached out to stroke their faces.

“Ahhh!!”

A loud voice rang out.

“Sister! Sister!! I missed you!!”

It was Lu.

Ghost and Black had been so thorough in licking Ariel’s cheeks that her face was soaked as if she had washed it.

Her hair clung messily, and even her neck felt damp.

‘This is a bit much,’ she thought. But she let them continue their affectionate display, finding it strangely not unpleasant despite the discomfort.

After a while, Ghost and Black bounded back into the forest, followed by Gaizen.

Ariel, Lakia, and Lu then sat by the lakeside, dipping their feet into the water and basking in the tranquil atmosphere.

Birds chirped and fluttered against the blue sky, while fish swam lazily in the lake.

The peaceful scenery was enchanting.

It was clear why Lakia loved this forest so much. Ariel found herself liking it as well.

Lakia and Lu asked Ariel about what had happened in the imperial capital, and Ariel recounted her recent adventures as she stirred the water with her feet.

She spoke of encountering Belmont at the city gate, her broken Ragnarok that led her to a grumpy dwarven craftsman, and meeting the saint Levana at the Black Market in Delight.

At the mention of Belmont, Lakia bristled.

“How dare such an inferior human treat you like that! If I had been there, I’d have turned that insignificant man to ashes on the spot!”

Lu, on the other hand, expressed interest in the metal used for Ragnarok, Titanlium.

“Wow! Titanlium! That’s incredible, Sister! Titanlium is said to have been used by giants—a truly extraordinary metal!”

Lakia frowned at the mention of giants.

“Giants? But they’re already extinct.”

“Even so, the weapons and tools they used might still be somewhere. Titanlium is one of them. It’s said to hold the fundamental power of the world. Weapons made from Titanlium are said to be so strong that nothing can withstand them.”

Lu gazed at Ragnarok with sparkling eyes.

“Amazing... Metal from the giants... The giants were said to move mountains and split seas with their immense strength. Ah, how wonderful it would be to see them in person.”

“Hmph,” Lakia scoffed, folding her arms.

“No matter how strong they were, they wouldn’t stand a chance against dragons. Those oversized brutes were probably just big and dumb.”

Lu could only offer a sheepish smile in response.

No matter how much he admired the giants, he couldn’t deny that dragons were the supreme beings, combining magic, strength, and intelligence.

“Well, that’s true. No giant could ever hope to match you, Lakia. Dragons are perfect beings, after all.”

“Well...”

A grin crept across Lakia’s face.

“Still, the giants were impressive in their own way. Such strength... Maybe someday we’ll search for them. Who knows? Some might have survived, hiding somewhere.”

“That would be incredible...!” Lu murmured dreamily, while Lakia turned her gaze back to Ariel.

‘By the way, Ariel, becoming the saint’s guardian knight...’

Lakia’s hair began to stir gently, mana rising like a deadly aura.

“Isn’t there any way to undo it?”

At Lakia’s question, Ariel shook her head.

“No, it’s irreversible.”

“T-Then, if that woman calls for you, you’ll have to go to her, won’t

you?”

“If it’s a dangerous situation.”

“...So, you’ll always, forever, be with her?”

Ariel answered calmly, but Lakia’s eyebrows twitched in irritation.

The overwhelming mana emanating from Lakia made Lu gasp and struggle for air.

“S-Sister, but if the saint dies, wouldn’t that free you from being her guardian knight?”

At Lu’s words, the oppressive mana vanished as if it had never existed.

“Oh, that’s right! If that woman dies, you won’t be her knight anymore! That’s a solution!”

While Lakia laughed brightly, Lu quietly scooted away to a safer distance.

Then Ariel spoke curtly.

“I won’t let Levana die.”

“...Ah.”

Lakia’s shoulders slumped.

She had just felt a glimmer of hope, only to have it snatched away.

Ariel reached out and gently patted Lakia’s head.

“You should be grateful to Levana, Lakia. She came all this way to heal your mother.”

Lakia flinched at Ariel’s words.

Thinking about it, that was true.

If Levana succeeded in breaking the curse of dark magic, she would

become Lakia's benefactor.

That vexing woman would be the one to save her mother's life.

"Urgh..."

Lakia clutched her head in frustration.

The very person who had taken Ariel from her was also the one saving her mother's life.

What a cruel twist of fate.

Then Ariel spoke up again.

"Lakia, I have a proposal."

"...A proposal?"

Lakia looked at Ariel with wide eyes.

"A proposal...?"

Chapter 96 : Evergreen Forest

(2)

Ariel's proposal to Lokia was to teach her teleportation magic.

Teleportation is a magic that allows instant movement to another location.

At first glance, it seems similar to Blink, but teleportation has no limit on travel distance.

As long as the destination is a place one has visited before, it's possible to travel instantly anywhere on the continent.

Of course, this comes with a fatal drawback.

That is the enormous mana consumption.

Casting teleportation requires an amount of mana that far exceeds the limits of what humans can achieve.

Because of this extreme mana requirement, even legendary archmages who have made history rarely used teleportation.

To solve this problem, teleportation scrolls were invented.

A teleportation scroll is a one-time-use tool that casts teleportation. It is created by engraving a teleportation magic circle onto paper and compressing an immense amount of mana into it.

The usage is simple.

Just tearing the scroll releases the stored mana, activating teleportation.

This allows the user to cast teleportation without consuming their

own mana.

Additionally, the scroll includes coordinates, enabling movement to locations one has never visited before.

The problem lies in the complex production process.

Creating a teleportation scroll requires multiple high-level mages, extraordinarily expensive scrolls and mana ink, and a significant amount of time to compress the mana.

In this sense, teleportation scrolls cannot be considered efficient either.

Currently, there are very few teleportation scrolls in the Empire. Most are carefully preserved as heirlooms by the royal family or high-ranking nobles.

These scrolls are rarely used, typically reserved for critical moments such as wars.

In daily life, people prefer to travel by carriage and avoid using teleportation scrolls unless absolutely necessary.

This is no different for dragons.

Even though dragons possess enough mana to cast teleportation, they seldom use it.

The reason is, once again, mana consumption.

The mana required for teleportation is burdensome even for dragons, making them prefer alternatives like building teleport portals, as Elysion did, or simply flying across the continent.

However, from Ariel's perspective...

There was no issue at all.

Ariel's mana capacity was infinite, meaning she could cast teleportation continuously without any strain.

Having recently experienced the convenience of teleportation scrolls and portals, Ariel was already deeply enamored with their utility.

A sudden magic lesson began by the lakeside of the Evergreen Forest.

Lakia started teaching Ariel the principles of teleportation magic.

Though it was called a lesson, there wasn't much to it.

Ariel only asked Lakia for a simple explanation of teleportation's principles. Nothing more was necessary.

From past experience, Ariel knew that as long as she understood the principle of a spell, she could instantly master it.

That's how she had learned telekinesis, which she now used frequently.

"The key to teleportation lies in manipulating spatial coordinates," Lakia explained as she sat by the lake.

"You focus mana while envisioning the coordinates of your destination. This creates a sort of passage between the current space and the destination..."

While Lakia explained earnestly, Ariel simply nodded, listening quietly.

Even though the explanation felt a bit complex, Ariel was gradually grasping the principles of teleportation.

Her mind began organizing intricate formulas as if she had been researching teleportation for years.

She was mastering how to control mana flow, recognize spatial coordinates, and open a passage to the destination.

Just by listening to Lakia's explanation, Ariel was perfectly acquiring teleportation.

"Then, let me demonstrate for you, Ariel."

Lakia finished her explanation and rose energetically.

Soon, a blue light shimmered beneath her feet, and Lakia vanished with a flash.

Lakia reappeared above the lake.

She seemed to hover in the air, the result of combining teleportation with flight magic.

“Ohh!”

Lu exclaimed in admiration, fiddling with the magical artifact on his finger.

“I can do that too!”

Lu disappeared and reappeared above Lakia’s head.

“How’s that?”

“That’s Blink, you fool. What I did is teleportation, which covers much greater distances.”

“Isn’t it similar over short distances?”

“No, it’s not!”

As the two argued, Ariel quietly closed her eyes and gathered her mana.

Blue mana rippled around her body like waves.

Then.

Flash!

The next moment, Ariel vanished.

She had cast teleportation.

Ariel’s destination was the sky.

Using telekinesis to hold herself in place, she gazed down below.

An expansive, lush forest of green stretched out beneath her, with tall trees densely packed and a quaint village nestled at the edge.

It was a familiar sight.

It was the same view she had seen from the sky with Lu's flight powder when she first embarked on her adventure.

The village before her was Herrington Village.

Though not much time had passed, seeing it again felt nostalgic.

Ariel smiled faintly.

In Herrington Village, peaceful daily life unfolded.

Children played in the village square, women drew water at the well, merchants chatted while unpacking goods in front of the inn, and farmers worked diligently in the nearby fields.

After taking in the scene, Ariel returned to the Evergreen Forest.

Flash!

"Say that again! How dare a tiny fairy talk back to me?" Lakia was shaking Lu back and forth by the shoulders.

Lu's eyes rolled as if he were about to faint, but Lakia paid no mind and continued shaking him.

Eventually, Lu slumped forward, and a look of panic crossed Lakia's face.

"Oh no... Lu, are you okay? Did you faint? Please wake up!"

Lakia tapped Lu's cheek, her voice filled with worry.

"Sorry, I got a little carried away..."

Just then, Lu opened his eyes and lifted his head. It turned out he had only been pretending to faint.

He stuck out his tongue at Lakia and grinned, prompting her to frown and fling him away.

“Don’t mess with me, you pesky fairy!”

Lu flew straight into the distance but used Blink to reappear on Ariel’s shoulder.

Sitting casually with his legs crossed, Lu looked completely unfazed.

Seeing this, Lakia clenched her fists but quickly shifted her focus to something more pressing: Ariel’s teleportation.

“Ariel! That was teleportation, wasn’t it? You mastered it perfectly in such a short time! Where did you go?” Lakia asked in astonishment.

Ariel briefly described the place she had visited—the village where she had first started her adventure.

Lakia blinked.

“Wait, you went outside the Evergreen Forest?”

“Yeah.”

“Then... that means you bypassed the magical barrier my mother placed?!”

“That’s right.”

Ariel nodded as if it were no big deal, but Lakia’s face was filled with shock.

“Th-That means your mana capacity surpasses my mother’s...”

The Evergreen Forest was Elysion’s private domain, accessible only through portals. Outside it lay a magical barrier that blocked intrusions and distorted spatial coordinates to prevent teleportation.

Yet Ariel had effortlessly breached that barrier and moved freely.

This feat was impossible without an overwhelming amount of mana and an exceptional level of magical control, far beyond even Elysion’s

capabilities.

For Lakia, this could only mean one thing: Ariel's power exceeded that of her mother.

Conflicted between confusion and awe, Lakia found herself admiring Ariel.

"Truly amazing, Ariel..."

Descending from her position above the lake, Lakia landed in front of Ariel.

Ariel stepped closer to her and said, "Thank you for teaching me teleportation, Lakia."

"N-No, if it's for you, I'll do anything. This is nothing," Lakia stammered.

"Then, what do you want in return?"

"In return...?" Lakia hesitated.

Initially, Ariel's request for teleportation lessons wasn't just a plea but a proposal.

While Lakia had taught her without expecting anything, Ariel wanted to properly repay her, knowing how useful teleportation would be in the future.

"Well, I don't really need anything, but if I were to ask..."

Lakia hesitated, unsure.

"How about I become your personal knight?" she finally blurted out.

Lu let out a chuckle. "Lakia, do you think she needs a knight?"

Lakia fell silent, realizing how absurd her suggestion sounded. What could she possibly protect Ariel from? If anything, Ariel protecting her made more sense.

'But Ariel has already formed a pact with the Saintess...'

Feeling flustered, Lakia's mind went blank, and she struggled to think of something else.

"Or... maybe I could be your personal steed? No, how about your bed? You could use me as a pillow. My body is large and soft enough when I undo my polymorph. Or perhaps..."

In her haste, Lakia blurted out nonsense, her face growing redder with each word.

Realizing how ridiculous she sounded, Lakia stared silently at the ground.

Then Ariel took a step closer.

"I have a better idea, Lakia."

"A better idea...? What is it?" Lakia asked, looking up with a mix of hope and nervousness.

Ariel reached out, gently patting Lakia's head. "When you have your own lair someday, I'll be its guardian."

Chapter 97 : Evergreen Forest

(3)

Lakia briefly opened and closed her mouth in disbelief.

Although the unexpected news left her stunned, joy soon welled up from the depths of her heart.

“Is it true? If I get my lair, will Ariel become my guardian?”

“Yes.”

“...!”

Lakia’s eyes began to sparkle, and her face lit up with a radiant smile.

“Wow! Thank you so much, Ariel!”

Overwhelmed with excitement, Lakia grabbed Ariel’s hands and shook them energetically, almost losing her balance in the process.

Ariel steadied her, and Lakia naturally found herself leaning into Ariel’s embrace.

“Ariel, becoming my guardian—it makes me so happy just thinking about it! I’ll become a great dragon worthy of you! I’ll serve you with all my heart as a magnificent dragon! If you want, I’ll even wear this bunny outfit every day!”

Unaware of the irony, Lakia had entirely flipped the usual dynamic of a guardian relationship.

A guardian was typically considered a subordinate, yet she was expressing her gratitude and devotion instead.

Other dragons might have found the situation absurd, but for Lakia,

it was simply thrilling.

She felt an urge to create her lair immediately so Ariel could become her guardian right away.

‘Hehe, I’ve won...’

Victory bloomed in Lakia’s heart.

Although no formal pact had been made, there was no need to worry about the saintess anymore. After all, humans only lived for a hundred years at most.

That time would pass quickly, and once the saintess was gone, Ariel would be hers entirely.

‘Then I’ll never let Ariel go.’

A happy fantasy began to unfold in Lakia’s mind.

First, she would establish her lair and use magic to create a beautiful forest, much like the Evergreen Forest.

Lush trees with green leaves swaying in the breeze, a vast meadow filled with colorful flowers, and a sparkling, clear lake with shimmering waves.

This place would be a paradise where she and Ariel could live together forever.

Maybe she could even include Lu, Ghost, and Black—if she felt generous.

In her imagination, Lakia was strolling hand in hand with Ariel through the forest.

The warm sunlight streamed through the leaves, the chirping of insects filled the air, and a pleasant floral scent lingered in the breeze.

Everything was perfect.

Ariel spoke softly.

“Lakia, thank you for letting me live in this beautiful forest you made. I’ll work hard to learn magic from you. And I’ll teach you the bunny dance.”

“The bunny dance? Wow, I can’t wait!”

“Want me to show you now?”

“Yes!”

Soon, Ariel started hopping and dancing like a bunny, with cute, bouncy movements.

Lakia burst into laughter, clapping her hands.

“You’re so adorable, Ariel! How do you dance like that?”

“You raise your hands like this and wiggle your hips side to side...”

Ariel enthusiastically taught Lakia the bunny dance, and before long, the two were hopping around like rabbits, laughing joyfully.

Small creatures of the forest gathered, watching them curiously.

“I’ll teach you all the dances I know, Lakia. There’s more than just the bunny dance.”

“Yes, Ariel!”

As Lakia indulged in her fantasies, Ariel’s pointed ears twitched slightly.

‘Ariel.’

It was a call from Levana.

Ariel lowered her gaze to look at Lakia, who was nestled against her chest with a contented smile, as if dreaming a happy dream.

“Lakia.”

Ariel’s voice stirred Lakia awake.

“It seems Levana’s healing is complete.”

When they arrived where Levana was, the space was filled with a sacred aura. Lakia quickly rushed to check on her mother.

The dark blotches on Elysion’s face had disappeared completely.

“Wow, did the healing succeed?”

At Lakia’s question, Levana, kneeling with a weary expression, nodded.

“Fortunately, the healing was successful. Elysion is safe now. She still needs rest, but the dark magic is...”

Before she could finish, Levana collapsed. Ariel swiftly caught her.

Levana appeared to have lost consciousness, as if in a deep sleep.

The miracle of a saintess consumed a tremendous amount of spiritual energy, far beyond ordinary holy magic. It was almost divine in nature, and the strain had taken its toll on her body and mind.

Lakia quickly prepared a place for Levana to rest—her own room, adorned with a high ceiling, a golden chandelier, and dragon paintings Lakia had drawn herself.

On the bed lay a large dragon-shaped cushion embroidered with golden thread, a gift Elysion had made for Lakia. It was Lakia’s most treasured possession, but she was willing to share it with Levana, who had saved her mother.

“This cushion will work, Ariel.”

Ariel nodded and gently laid Levana on the cushion. Its softness cradled her delicate body.

“Will she be alright...?” Lakia asked anxiously.

Ariel reassured her. “She seems fine. She’s just resting.”

Ariel placed her hand on Levana’s forehead and cast a healing spell, **Vitalize**. A soft light emanated from Ariel’s hand, flowing into Levana like life-giving rain.

Levana’s complexion improved noticeably, and a faint smile appeared on her lips as if she were dreaming of something pleasant—perhaps a feast of macarons.

With that, Elysion’s dark magic was successfully cured.

When Levana finally awoke, she was fully revitalized, thanks to Ariel’s powerful holy magic.

According to Levana, Ariel’s **Vitalize** was on par with the archbishop Andersen’s level—a testament to Ariel’s divine blessing and vast mana reserves.

Later, Ariel teleported Levana back to the sanctum. Although Levana was momentarily surprised by the teleportation, she quickly accepted it.

“Um, Ariel,” Levana began hesitantly. “I think I need to visit the dragon’s lair again tomorrow. Just to ensure the dark magic is completely gone...”

“I’ll come get you tomorrow.”

Levana’s face flushed, and she fidgeted nervously.

“Actually, that’s not true. The dark magic is gone. I just... want to go back. Because... you’ll be there. And I want to get to know the dragons better, and... I didn’t even get to greet the winged fairy, and...”

“Alright,” Ariel replied with a small smile.

It wasn’t difficult for her, now that she had mastered teleportation. Besides, Lakia seemed eager to repay Levana in some way as well.

“I’ll come for you tomorrow.”

Levana beamed. “Thank you, Ariel!”

She hugged Ariel tightly. “See you tomorrow!”

“Rest well. And thank you for your help.”

As Ariel expressed her gratitude, Levana’s eyes grew misty.

“Being a saintess means this is my duty... but I’m grateful too—for having you as my guardian knight. That alone...”

Tears welled up, and Levana tried to hold them back but couldn’t.

“I-I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to...”

Ariel silently embraced Levana, gently patting her back. She had already learned how to comfort her.

With a quiet smile, Ariel reached into her inventory and pulled out a macaron.

Chapter 98 : Evergreen Forest

(4)

A few days passed.

Elysion had now completely recovered and was spending peaceful days in the Evergreen Forest.

By her side was always Gaizen. The two were often seen holding hands, occasionally hugging, and sometimes even... more intimate.

Anyway, just as Ariel thought, Elysion and Gaizen were definitely more than just friends.

The way they looked at each other burned too intensely for them to be seen simply as a dragon and a guardian.

It turned out that the Evergreen Forest was their secret paradise, and the trees and flowers stood as silent witnesses to their forbidden love.

A love that transcended species.

Lakia, watching the two, often wore an expression of envy. Whenever Ariel was nearby, she would blush for no apparent reason,

then either smile dreamily or let out a small, startled shriek as if lost in her imagination.

“Are you feeling unwell?”

It was Saintess Levana who asked the concerned question, her face full of worry.

She placed a hand on Lakia’s forehead and tilted her head. “No fever,” she murmured.

Since healing Elysion, Levana had been visiting the Evergreen Forest daily.

Elysion had granted her unrestricted access to this place as thanks for saving her life.

Ariel even set up a teleport portal under the sanctuary, allowing Levana to visit anytime she wished.

Sometimes, Levana would stop by Delight, located in the heart of the empire, and bring back an assortment of desserts—courtesy of Elysion's funds.

Elysion also had a fondness for Delight's sweets.

Thanks to her frequent visits and outgoing personality, Levana had quickly grown close to everyone.

She befriended Fairy Lu, Dragon Lakia, and even the wolves Ghost and Black.

Watching her frolic along the lakeshore with Ghost and Black or chat happily with Lu, one couldn't help but feel that Levana truly embodied the essence of a saintess.

A saintess who loved all and was loved by all.

Yet, even the saintess wasn't on familiar terms with everyone. One such person was Lakia's older brother, Lionel.

Lionel had been unusually sensitive since *that incident* at the magical hot spring.

He rarely left his room, and when he did, he avoided eye contact with Levana and Ariel, hastily retreating at the first chance.

Elysion and Lakia, puzzled by Lionel's behavior, couldn't figure out the reason no matter how much they tried.

Only Ariel and Levana knew the truth.

Knock, knock.

Ariel rapped lightly on Lionel's door.

After some rustling from within, the door opened slightly, and Lionel peeked out.

"Hi," Ariel greeted, her tone bright.

Lionel's expression stiffened.

He tried to shut the door, but Ariel held it firmly, preventing it from closing.

'W-What kind of strength...?'

That a dragon couldn't overpower an elf's strength seemed utterly absurd to Lionel.

Ariel easily pushed the door open, leaving Lionel with no choice but to step aside in defeat.

"Can I come in for a moment?"

Although it was phrased as a question, it was more of a notification. Ariel would enter regardless of his answer.

"J-Just for a moment, I guess..." Lionel replied, still avoiding eye contact.

Since *that incident*, Lionel had been tormented by embarrassment every night.

Dancing was fine. Being naked—well, that could be forgiven.

But spinning with his hands raised above his head in that sultry pose...

That was definitely a mistake. The memory of that provocative posture was unbearably humiliating.

Meanwhile, Ariel quietly observed Lionel's room.

It had a starkly different vibe from Lakia's.

The room was filled with various tools, and the walls were adorned with weapons and armor, seemingly crafted by Lionel himself.

To Ariel's eyes, they looked rather crude.

On the desk, books related to weapon crafting and metallurgy lay scattered, and the wardrobe contained neatly hung clothes inspired by traditional dwarf designs.

"W-What are you staring at?" Lionel asked gruffly, sitting on the edge of his bed with his stocky frame hunched.

"I like this room," Ariel said with a smile as she continued to look around.

"It feels like a dwarf craftsman's workshop."

Lionel's cheeks reddened, and he turned his head away. A faint hint of pride showed on his face—but only for a moment.

His expression then turned somber.

"But I heard everything... My Ragnarok broke, didn't it? You even had another dwarf repair it..."

Ariel nodded.

She had come to talk about that very subject.

For days, she had sought an opportunity to converse with Lionel, but his refusal to make eye contact forced her to approach him directly.

Ariel couldn't linger in the dragon's lair forever. She would soon embark on her next adventure, and it would be a while before she saw Lionel again.

This was her chance to settle things.

"I-I guess I just don't have a talent for crafting..." Lionel muttered, hugging his knees.

“I’m not a dwarf craftsman... I’m just an ordinary dragon...”

“.....”

Ariel approached Lionel and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. His dejected expression tugged at her heart.

“But the Ragnarok you made is an amazing sword.”

“It’s useless if it breaks... I worked so hard on it... I really put my heart and soul into that sword...”

It was true.

If he had poured everything into its creation, the fact that it broke so easily meant he indeed lacked talent.

But still.

“To me, it’s the best sword. I love it.”

Ariel unsheathed Ragnarok from her back.

The silver blade gleamed coldly.

Though its blade had been reforged with titanite, the hilt remained Lionel’s handiwork.

“And its effects are excellent.”

Placing her hand on the mana stone embedded in the hilt, Ariel activated Ragnarok, causing a crimson glow to radiate from the blade.

Lionel stared at the light, momentarily entranced.

“I want to keep making weapons... But now I know for sure... I don’t have the talent for it...”

Hearing Lionel’s lament, Ariel sheathed Ragnarok and silently regarded him.

Tears welled up in Lionel’s large eyes.

Ariel spoke softly.

“What if you learned directly from a dwarf?”

“...From a dwarf?”

“Yes.”

Under normal circumstances, Lionel might have exploded in indignation.

‘I’m a dragon! Who dares teach a dragon anything?! Dragons are perfect beings who don’t need to learn!’

But after the humiliation of his masterpiece breaking and the psychological blow at the magical hot spring, Lionel was in a state to reflect calmly.

‘Indeed...’

Lionel had many questions about weapon crafting.

The unique techniques of dwarf metallurgy, the properties and strengths of different metals, methods to enhance durability—these were things books couldn’t fully teach.

The kind of secrets only master craftsmen knew.

‘If I could learn those directly from a dwarf...’

A smile began to spread across Lionel’s face.

In his mind, he envisioned himself having in-depth conversations about crafting techniques with a dwarf master.

It would be a golden opportunity to deepen his understanding and elevate his skills.

Lionel stood up abruptly.

“That’s it! I’ll learn directly from a dwarf!”

His face now brimming with energy, Lionel added, “But I’ll need to

hide the fact that I'm a dragon, right? If they know, they might be too scared to teach me properly.

And it's probably best to go to the Dwarven Mountains. That's where the real master craftsmen live. I should leave right away."

Lionel began packing in a frenzy, showcasing his extraordinary decisiveness.

Ariel quietly approached him.

"Shall I introduce you to my dwarf friend?"

Lionel stopped what he was doing and looked at Ariel.

"Y-Your friend? You have a dwarf friend?"

Lionel's expression turned one of envy.

Ariel nodded and lightly stroked Lionel's beard.

"His name is Bagran. He lives in the Dwarven Mountains. I'll introduce you to him."

A few days later, Lionel arrived at the Dwarven Mountains.

Following Ariel's directions, he found a house built of heavy logs.

The sound of hammering echoed endlessly, and thick black smoke billowed from the chimney.

Approaching the house, Lionel saw an array of tools lined up by the door—anvils, tongs, and various sharp implements, all exuding the spirit of a master craftsman.

Lionel's heart raced.

Soon, he would learn the secrets of a dwarf master craftsman.

Taking a deep breath, Lionel turned the doorknob and entered.

"Welcome," a gruff voice greeted him.

“What’s this, a dwarf? Thought you were a customer.”

The owner of the voice soon appeared—a burly dwarf with a thick beard, holding a massive hammer. It was Bagran.

Lionel introduced himself awkwardly.

“I, uh, I’m Lionel.”

Bagran gave him a look that said, ‘So what?’

Lionel pressed on.

“I was sent here by Ariel...”

“Ariel?”

At the mention of Ariel, Bagran’s expression brightened immediately.

“Ariel, that sweet and kind elf? My friend Ariel?!”

Lionel nodded slightly.

A big smile

spread across Bagran’s face, a smile full of fondness for Ariel.

“So Ariel sent you? Then you’re welcome here! Come in! Want a drink?”

Lionel shook his head.

“I don’t drink.”

“...?”

Bagran gave Lionel a puzzled look.

A dwarf who didn’t drink? How strange...

Lionel, meanwhile, was busy taking in the sight of Bagran’s house.

The walls were lined with weapons and armor, but what caught his

eye was a mithril alloy shield hanging prominently.

“That shield... it’s incredible...”

Bagran grinned at Lionel’s admiration.

“That shield? It’s my most treasured possession. Ariel gave it to me.”

“Did Ariel make it?”

“No, she won it in a competition and gave it to me.

By the way, how is Ariel? She doing well?”

“She’s doing great,” Lionel replied, his tone somewhat dismissive.

Everyone was doing too well, in fact.

But that wasn’t the point. Lionel had come here with a purpose.

“So, what brings you here?” Bagran asked, finally addressing the matter at hand.

Lionel swallowed nervously and answered, “I want to learn about weapon crafting...”

“From me?”

“Yes...”

“Are you saying you want to be my apprentice?”

“That’s right...”

“Interesting.”

Bagran looked Lionel over, sizing him up.

He seemed a bit clueless, like an inexperienced dwarf, but Bagran had been considering taking on an apprentice anyway.

And most importantly, this guy had been sent by Ariel...

Bagran grinned.

“Becoming my apprentice won’t be easy. Are you ready for that?”

Lionel nodded firmly.

“Of course. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Good.”

Bagran clapped Lionel on the shoulder.

“Then let’s get started! I’ll teach you everything about the art of dwarf crafting!”

Chapter 99 : Elf Forest (1)

Whoosh!

The torrential rain poured fiercely.

Lightning flashed across the sky, threatening to split it apart, and thunder roared with such force that the ground trembled beneath it.

Despite it being morning, the world was as dark as night. The relentless rain and wind blurred visibility to a near-zero.

In the midst of this downpour, Ariel walked silently.

She could have easily shielded herself from the rain using psychokinesis or a barrier, but Ariel deliberately allowed herself to be drenched.

It felt good to her.

Enjoying the sensation of cold rain soaking her skin, Ariel continued on her way.

Her destination: the Forest of the Elves.

The Forest of the Elves was the next objective in her journey.

The reason for choosing it as her destination wasn't anything profound.

The catalyst came last night in the Evergreen Forest when Elysion's guardian, Gaizen, had asked her a question.

"How's the Forest of the Elves these days?"

Ariel hadn't been able to answer.

She'd never visited the Forest of the Elves before.

It seemed Gaizen had asked because Ariel was an elf, but in truth, she had almost forgotten that fact herself.

She'd been to the Dwarven Mountains and the Lizardman Kingdom, but never to the Forest of the Elves.

Realizing this, Ariel decided to make it her next destination.

However, she had to go alone.

The elves, like the Lizardmen, were a reclusive species, and non-elves were not permitted to enter their forest.

Neither Ruga, the fairy, nor Ghost and Black, the wolves, would be able to step even one foot into the Forest of the Elves.

Even Lakia, who could polymorph into an elf, had to stay behind to guard the dragon's lair, as Elysion's body was not yet fully healed and Lionel had departed for the Dwarven Mountains.

Thus, Ariel set off on another solo adventure.

It would be a lie to say she didn't feel lonely, but this journey wasn't expected to be long.

Her goal was simply to explore the Forest of the Elves and return.

Moreover, she wasn't completely alone.

Ariel had brought along Sparky, her dragon doll.

Currently stored in her inventory to keep it dry from the rain, she planned to let it fly around again once the rain stopped.

But the rain showed no signs of stopping.

If anything, it grew heavier, obscuring the path ahead.

Ariel halted her steps momentarily and focused her gaze forward.

A toppled carriage lay ahead.

Near the carriage, a man lay collapsed on the ground while a woman frantically shook him.

“Honey! Wake up, honey!”

Nearby, a stream had overflowed due to the heavy rain, creating a torrent of rushing water.

The torrent was on the verge of engulfing the carriage.

Realizing it was no use, the woman stood and approached the carriage.

She reached inside, trying to retrieve something, but the rain and mud made it difficult.

“Waaah!”

The sound of a child crying came from inside the carriage. It seemed there was a child inside.

Boom!

A deafening sound echoed from a distance, signaling a landslide.

Mud and water cascaded rapidly down the mountainside.

At this rate, it was only a matter of time before the carriage was swept away.

“No, no...!”

The woman cried out in despair, and Ariel sprang into action.

Swish.

In the blink of an eye, Ariel appeared beside the woman.

Standing on her toes, she peered into the carriage to find a young girl crying.

“Waaah! Waaah!”

Using psychokinesis, Ariel lifted the carriage high into the air.

The raging torrent passed by in the nick of time, and the woman recoiled in shock.

Once Ariel placed the carriage in a safe location, the woman rushed toward it.

“...Lina!”

Meanwhile, Ariel approached the man lying on the ground. Blood trickled from a wound on his head.

Placing her hand on the man’s head, Ariel cast a healing spell.

“Healing.”

A pure white light emanated from Ariel’s hand, seeping into the man’s wound.

The injury healed instantly, and the bleeding stopped.

“Ugh, ugh...”

The man opened his eyes shortly after.

“Honey? Lina!”

He bolted upright, his eyes scanning desperately for his wife and child.

“Over here, honey!”

The woman waved tearfully from the carriage.

The man scrambled toward them in haste.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Lina is safe too.”

“Thank goodness. Oh, thank goodness.”

He let out a deep sigh of relief and embraced his wife and child tightly.

Then, he turned to Ariel.

“I... uh... Huh?!”

Suddenly, Ariel sensed something rushing toward her from behind.

When she turned, she saw a massive tree swinging its branch like a whip.

She quickly deployed a shield to block it.

Thwack!

The tree continued its relentless assault, swinging its branches furiously. Ariel held her shield firmly as she observed the tree.

It wasn't just the fact that the tree was alive and moving—it emanated a peculiar energy.

A dark aura seeped from its body, as though it had been consumed by powerful malevolence.

What's more, Ariel could sense emotions from the tree—it seemed sorrowful.

With a hunch, Ariel cast a divine spell.

“Purification.”

A radiant light of purification surged from Ariel's hand, enveloping the tree.

The dark aura dissipated, and the tree's natural color returned.

The tree seemed to relax, lowering its massive branches gently toward Ariel as if to apologize.

Then, it lumbered back into the forest.

Ariel watched it retreat before turning her attention back to the

carriage.

“Thank you. If it weren’t for your timely help, my family wouldn’t have made it.”

The man bowed repeatedly, his gratitude overflowing. Beside him, the woman also expressed her thanks, tears in her eyes.

“We are so, so grateful... I don’t know how we’ll ever repay you...”

Although the rain continued to pour, Ariel had expanded her shield, keeping the area around the carriage dry.

The only sound was the soft patter of rain hitting the shield.

Ariel decided to wait until the rain subsided.

After all, the path ahead was obscured, and she couldn’t bear to leave this family in such a storm.

Since they were stuck here, they might as well have a meal.

The man gathered damp firewood and managed to ignite it with difficulty, while the woman retrieved ingredients from the carriage to prepare a meal.

It turned out they were merchants, and their carriage was packed with spices and provisions.

While the couple prepared the meal, Ariel played with the child.

The little girl, around three or four years old, toddled after Sparky as Ariel levitated it with psychokinesis.

Soon, the aroma of stew filled the air.

The woman skillfully cooked a delicious stew, and they all gathered around the fire to eat.

“...You were incredible earlier. It looked like you were using holy magic. Are you perhaps a cleric?”

The man’s question prompted Ariel to nod.

Technically, she was a mage, but as a newly appointed Holy Knight, cleric wasn't too far off.

"Wow, I've never met an elven cleric before. By the way, was that an Ent earlier?"

The man glanced at the woman, who nodded.

"...The rumors about Ents attacking people around here turned out to be true."

"But it's strange. Ents are usually docile. They don't attack unless the forest is being destroyed."

Ents were spirits of the forest.

They were friendly to all races and particularly kind to elves. Ariel had fond memories of Ents playfully cuddling elven children.

"For an Ent to attack an elf... It must be related to that dark aura earlier."

The dark aura Ariel had purified suggested the Ent had been corrupted.

Given the rumors of Ents attacking people nearby, something was clearly amiss in the forest.

Ariel glanced toward the direction where the Ent had disappeared.

Coincidentally, it was the same direction as the Forest of the Elves.

Perhaps she'd uncover the cause of the corruption during her journey.

Eventually, the rain began to subside, and sunlight peeked through the clouds.

Ariel rose, ready to continue her journey.

"Thank you so much."

The man expressed his gratitude once more.

“We’ll wait here until our caravan finds us. They’ll likely be looking for us since we didn’t arrive on time.”

“Yes.”

Ariel patted the child’s head as she tugged on Sparky’s tail.

“Lina, don’t bother the doll. Come here.”

At the woman’s call, the child toddled over to her arms, and Ariel gave a polite nod before turning away.

It was time to resume her journey to the Forest of the Elves.

Chapter 100 : Elf Forest (2)

The forest, quiet after the rain, was serene.

Sunlight filtering through the leaves made the dewdrops sparkle, and the refreshing scent of the woods tickled the tip of the nose.

Ariel slowly moved toward the elven forest.

The ground was damp and squishy, but not so much that it was difficult to walk.

However, her eyelids were growing heavier and heavier. The drowsiness from her recent meal was catching up to her.

Ariel tried to keep her sleepy eyes open but found it futile.

Her pace slowed, and eventually, she collapsed forward.

What caught Ariel as she fell was a large blade of grass.

The soft grass wrapped gently around her body like a bed.

Although slightly damp from the rain, it couldn't disturb Ariel's sleep.

Curling up on the grass, Ariel's small figure rested peacefully.

A single ray of sunlight softly landed on her face.

The breeze rustled, and the sound of droplets falling from the leaves echoed rhythmically.

After spreading a shield around her, Ariel drifted off to sleep.

A short while later, a small shadow emerged from behind a nearby

rock.

It was an elven boy.

With sparkling green eyes filled with curiosity, the boy cautiously approached Ariel.

He circled her slowly, tapping on her shield with his hand.

The shield seemed incredibly solid, as if even the sharpest object wouldn't leave a mark.

At that moment, Ariel shifted slightly, turning to her other side.

The boy flinched, startled, but relaxed upon noticing her steady breathing.

Then, a rustling sound nearby caught his attention.

The boy turned his head and paled.

“Ent!”

Standing before him was a massive tree.

A forest spirit, an Ent.

Normally, the boy would have smiled and waved.

The Ent would have slowly stretched out a branch to embrace him in return.

But now was different.

Black smoke was seeping ominously from the Ent's body.

It had become corrupted, like the others.

“Greenheart...”

To make matters worse, this Ent was the boy's friend.

An elder Ent who often spent time with him—Greenheart.

But Greenheart didn't seem to recognize him.

"Greenheart, it's me, Sylvan..."

Sylvan's eyes brimmed with sorrow and regret as he gazed at Greenheart.

Finally, Greenheart swung a branch toward him.

Whoosh!

The branch lashed out like a whip.

"Ah!"

Sylvan quickly dodged, and the branch struck Ariel's shield instead.

Thud!

Barely avoiding the attack, Sylvan retreated further.

Greenheart didn't chase Sylvan but instead focused on attacking Ariel's shield.

Thud! Thud!

No matter how hard Greenheart struck, Ariel's shield remained unscathed.

'What do I do...'

Sylvan's face filled with worry.

While the shield took no damage, Greenheart's branches were starting to snap and break.

Thud! Thud!

Even so, Greenheart didn't stop.

If this continued, his branches would all break.

Sylvan bit his lip, desperately searching for a solution.

‘Ah, maybe...’

Rummaging through his pocket, Sylvan pulled out a small flute.

‘Maybe the flute’s sound can lure Greenheart away.’

Of course, doing so might put Sylvan in danger.

But it was better than watching Greenheart’s branches break completely.

If that happened, Greenheart would be in immense pain.

Sylvan brought the flute to his lips.

Taking a deep breath, he began to play.

A clear, melodious sound cut through the still forest air.

The soft, lively tune spread on the breeze.

Greenheart froze at the sound, and a glimmer of hope appeared in Sylvan’s eyes.

‘Greenheart, come this way!’

Sylvan continued playing.

Greenheart now focused entirely on the flute’s melody.

Finally, Greenheart began lumbering toward Sylvan.

Sylvan retreated slowly, luring Greenheart further away.

A small smile crept onto Sylvan’s face, his plan seemingly working.

But it didn’t last.

Suddenly, Greenheart’s slow movements turned swift, the situation escalating rapidly.

For some reason, Greenheart’s pace quickened.

Within moments, he was upon Sylvan, lashing out with a branch.

“Ah!”

Sylvan narrowly dodged, but in his panic, he dropped the flute.

Before he could pick it up, Greenheart swung again.

Sylvan struggled to evade but slipped in the muddy ground.

Thud!

A branch struck Sylvan’s leg.

“Agh!”

He cried out in pain, rolling on the ground.

Blood poured from Sylvan’s injured leg.

“G-Greenheart...”

Clutching his wounded leg, Sylvan looked up at Greenheart.

The corrupted Ent loomed over him, black smoke swirling as it raised another branch.

“Please, snap out of it... It’s me, Sylvan...”

Sylvan pleaded desperately, but nothing changed.

Greenheart brought the branch down, and Sylvan squeezed his eyes shut.

At that moment, a calm voice broke through.

“Purification.”

Sylvan hesitantly opened his eyes.

A brilliant white light enveloped Greenheart’s body.

Beside the glowing Ent, a luminous figure approached Sylvan.

It was the elf who had been sleeping on the grass—Ariel.

In her hand was the flute Sylvan had dropped.

Ariel handed it back to him.

“Ah...”

Sylvan took the flute, dumbfounded.

Ariel then cast another holy spell.

“Healing.”

With the sacred light, Sylvan’s leg healed completely.

Though still stunned, Sylvan flinched as Greenheart’s branches extended toward them again.

“Ah!”

But this time, Greenheart wasn’t attacking.

He gently enveloped Ariel and Sylvan in his branches, cradling them tenderly.

“G-Greenheart...”

Tears welled up in Sylvan’s eyes.

The black smoke dissipated, and Greenheart returned to his kind, gentle self.

Though speechless, Ents and elves could share emotions, and Greenheart conveyed his deep regret for what had happened.

Sylvan reassured him, stroking his trunk gently.

“It’s okay, Greenheart. I know you didn’t mean it.”

Sylvan then turned to Ariel, who was deep in thought.

‘I wonder, how do Ents eat? Or do they just absorb nutrients from the

ground?’

“Hey, big sister.”

Sylvan’s voice brought Ariel out of her thoughts.

“Thanks to you, Greenheart is back to normal. Thank you.”

“Mm.” Ariel nodded.

At that moment, Greenheart softly stroked Ariel’s back with a branch, expressing his gratitude.

Ariel decided to ask Sylvan directly.

“By the way, do Ents—”

“They’re corrupted.”

“Huh?”

“You mean the black smoke earlier, right? Most of the Ents in this forest are like that now. We call it corruption.”

Ariel nodded slightly.

She had meant to ask where Ents’ mouths were, but Sylvan continued.

“By the way, how did you purify Greenheart just now?”

“Holy magic.”

“Can you purify the other corrupted Ents too?”

“Yes.”

“No matter how many there are?”

“Yes.”

Sylvan felt both relief and disbelief.

The elven forest was in chaos because of this corruption, and yet the solution was so simple?

“Then, big sister, please help us. The elven forest—”

Whoosh!

An arrow shot through the air, aiming for Sylvan’s heart.

Ariel quickly expanded her shield, saving him just in time.

But the attack wasn’t over.

Arrows rained down in rapid succession.

Ariel widened her shield, blocking them all.

Sylvan hid behind her, trembling, while Greenheart crouched low.

“These are... elven arrows...”

Sylvan picked up one of the fallen arrows.

Its blue feathers confirmed its origin.

“Elves... why...?”

While Sylvan muttered, Ariel’s sharp gaze locked onto the bushes.

Specifically, at the hidden assailant firing the arrows.

Whoosh!

Another arrow flew.

Ariel swatted it aside effortlessly.

In the next moment, Ariel vanished from where she stood.

Chapter 101 : Elf Forest (3)

Ariel reappeared amidst the dense undergrowth.

An elf lay crouched there, bowstring drawn taut.

A slender yet firm physique.

A narrow waist and long limbs, characteristic of elves.

It was the same assailant who had just shot an arrow at Ariel.

The elf, still holding the drawn bowstring, darted their eyes around, likely searching for Ariel.

Unaware that Ariel was right beside them.

Ariel reached out and snatched the elf's bow effortlessly, as if taking a toy from a child.

Before the elf could even react, Ariel grabbed the back of their neck and flung them out of the undergrowth.

The elf soared through the bushes, rolling nimbly to the ground as they landed on their feet.

In one smooth motion, a sharp dagger appeared in the elf's hand.

Though the movement seemed that of a skilled warrior, it was meaningless.

The elf could do nothing, no matter how skilled they were.

“?!”

The elf's eyes widened as they felt their body lift off the ground.

Their hand involuntarily opened, causing the dagger to clatter to the ground.

Their limbs stretched rigidly in every direction, frozen.

It was as if an enormous invisible hand had grabbed hold of them.

Step. Step.

Ariel approached the elf, who was suspended midair by telekinesis.

The elf's eyes had turned black, and an ominous aura seeped from their skin.

The same symptoms as the corrupted ents.

“Grr... Grr...”

The elf let out a strange groan.

If their mouth hadn't been fixed by the telekinesis, they might have been screaming incoherently.

“Oh no, it's Lina!”

Sylvan ran over, shouting in alarm.

He stared in shock at the elf suspended in the air.

“Why is Lina like this? She looks just like the corrupted ents...”

At that moment, Lina's body was enveloped in light.

Ariel had cast a purification spell.

The blackened hue in Lina's eyes faded, and the dark energy coursing over her skin vanished.

Ariel released her telekinesis, gently setting Lina down.

Lina staggered, groaning softly.

“Ugh... Where am I... Why am I in a place like this...”

She looked around, confused.

Sylvan stepped forward.

“Lina! It’s me, Sylvan. Do you recognize me?”

“...Sylvan?”

Lina squinted at him.

“Sylvan, what are you doing here? You’re not supposed to leave the refuge. The forest is dangerous right now.”

“I know. But it’s boring and suffocating to stay there all the time....”

Sylvan mumbled sheepishly under Lina’s stern gaze.

“What if you ran into a corrupted ent?”

“...I already did. But more importantly, you just attacked me.”

“What?”

Lina’s eyes widened.

“I attacked you?”

“You shot an arrow at me from the bushes. If this silver-haired lady hadn’t helped, I’d be dead by now.”

Lina’s expression turned grave.

“But I don’t remember... How could I have attacked you....”

“You were like the corrupted ents. Your eyes were black, and there was dark energy flowing from your skin. This silver-haired lady used holy magic to bring you back to normal.”

Lina’s gaze shifted to Ariel.

“...Thank you for saving Sylvan. But you... I’ve never seen you before. Do you not live in the Elven Forest?”

“No.”

“Then you must not know what’s happening in the Elven Forest right now. No, this isn’t the time for that. I must go at once. If I was corrupted, the other elven warriors could be in danger too.”

Lina picked up her fallen dagger and secured it to her thigh.

She then took her bow from Ariel, slinging it over her shoulder before pausing in thought.

“...Now that I think about it, you used holy magic to restore me?”

Ariel nodded silently.

Lina was the most exceptional warrior in the Elven Forest.

As the commander of the warriors, she led an elite unit specialized in combat, the strongest force protecting the Elven Forest.

Though the current peaceful era left them with little more to do than patrol and stand guard, Lina never neglected her duties.

She believed that constant vigilance was essential to the forest’s safety.

Not a single day went by without her and her unit scouring the forest for threats.

One day, a soldier on a patrol opposite Lina’s reported something unusual.

“It was definitely an ent. But there was black smoke emanating from its body. It attacked me, but deep down, it seemed sorrowful. As if it wasn’t attacking of its own will....”

Hearing the report, Lina’s expression darkened.

Ents attacking elves was an unthinkable event.

Ents were like gentle mothers, embracing elves warmly no matter how much they acted up.

However, the black smoke emanating from their bodies gave off an ominous feeling.

And soon, that foreboding turned into reality.

Events similar to what the unit had experienced began to unfold throughout the forest.

The Ents, now emitting black smoke, attacked elves, animals, and even humans.

While humans might not understand, the elves knew.

The Ents weren't attacking of their own volition.

They were merely being controlled by something.

As a result, the elves chose not to fight back against the Ents but to retreat instead.

They didn't want to harm the Ents.

Clearly, something was happening to them.

In a meeting of the elven elders, this phenomenon was named "Corruption."

The sight of black smoke billowing from the Ents made it appear as if they were contaminated.

For reasons unknown, the corrupted Ents were converging on the elves' village.

The elves planned to either lure the Ents away or build barricades to prevent them from entering, buying time to uncover the cause of the phenomenon and resolve the situation.

But their plans didn't last long.

It turned out that it wasn't just the Ents that were corrupted.

The World Tree—

The heart of the forest and a symbol of the elves—was also

succumbing to corruption.

Like the Ents, the World Tree emitted black smoke as it withered away.

Trees and flowers in the area withered, and fruits rotted and fell to the ground.

Witnessing this, the elves were consumed by terror.

The World Tree, which represented everything to the elves, was being corrupted.

They began to think that perhaps this was truly the end.

The reason why the corrupted Ents were converging on the elves' village also became clear.

The Ents were being drawn to the World Tree.

Like children seeking their mother, the corrupted Ents gathered around the World Tree and violently attacked all living beings nearby.

In the end, the elves abandoned their village and the World Tree, fleeing to the surrounding forest for refuge.

For the elves to leave the World Tree was nothing short of a catastrophe.

Nameria, the wise leader of the elves, sought out the "Eternal Archive" to find a solution to this disaster.

The Eternal Archive was a sacred place that preserved the wisdom and knowledge of the elven ancestors.

It was only accessible during moments of extreme crisis for the elves.

There, Nameria scoured countless ancient texts and finally found a prophecy related to the current calamity.

It was a prophecy left by Althea, a hero of the ancient elves:

“From the distant darkness, the power of the evil god Nakshis will awaken.

The World Tree will be tainted black, and the forest will wither and die, placing the elves on the brink of extinction.

But do not fear.

When the day of destiny arrives, a hero shall emerge to save the elves and fight against the dark power.

Though this hero does not carry the blood of the elves, their strength and courage will be enough to lead the elven people.

They will bring light and hope, restoring peace to the land.

The fate of the elves will rest in their hands.

Do not fear.

Await the day when the elven hero will banish the darkness and save the elves.

When that day comes, the World Tree will turn green again, and peace will grace the earth.”

As they hurried along, Lina cast glances at Ariel.

According to the ancient prophecy, the hero who would save the elves did not inherit elven blood.

For this reason, Nameria and the elven elders speculated that the hero might be the human champion who had recently emerged in a human city.

The elves, now in hiding, resolved to wait patiently for the human hero to arrive.

With the prophecy already unfolding, they firmly believed the hero would appear and save them.

But no one knew when or from which direction the human hero would come.

Thus, Lina and her unit spread throughout the forest, waiting to guide the hero to the elves' domain.

'But what if... it's this child instead?'

Lina wore a troubled expression.

Though she believed in the prophecy, she couldn't shake the feeling that Ariel might be the hero destined to save the elves.

The timing of Ariel's arrival in the forest, the massive sword on their back, and their ability to purify corruption with holy magic—everything pointed to Ariel.

And if a human hero was truly meant to save the elves, why did the prophecy specifically call them the "elven hero"?

Wouldn't it make more sense to simply call them the human hero?

Could it mean that the hero destined to save the elves was, in fact, an elf?

Of course, this was merely Lina's personal speculation.

She wasn't entirely certain, but Ariel continued to weigh on her mind.

Just in case, Lina was guiding Ariel toward the World Tree.

Perhaps Ariel could use their holy magic to purify the corruption affecting the World Tree.

Chapter 102 : Elf Forest (4)

As they approached the World Tree, the aura of darkness grew stronger.

The once lush branches of the trees drooped lifelessly, and the vibrant green leaves fell weakly to the ground, scattering across the forest floor.

The Elf Forest, once filled with the laughter of elves, was now enveloped in an eerie silence.

Sylvan trembled slightly as he looked at the transformed forest.

‘Is this truly the end of the Elf Forest?’ The thought filled him with unease.

Just yesterday, it hadn’t been this bad, but the forest seemed to be dying rapidly.

“Don’t worry,” came a voice beside him.

Lina, walking alongside him, clasped his hand tightly.

“Everything will be fine.”

“Lina...”

“Even in the midst of darkness, holding on to hope and leaning on one another as we move forward—that is the true spirit of an elf warrior.”

Sylvan gazed at Lina for a moment.

Lina, the strongest warrior among the elves.

She had always been the steadfast pillar of their people. He could

trust her words.

“Thank you, Lina...” Sylvan said in a steady voice.

In this moment, being with Lina brought him immense comfort.

And Greenheart was with them, protecting Sylvan from the encroaching darkness.

There was no need to feel afraid or uncertain.

All they had to do was keep moving forward with hope, together with Lina and Greenheart.

Just as the thought crossed Sylvan’s mind, Lina suddenly lunged at him.

“Graaah!”

She tackled him to the ground and began strangling his neck.

“Gah! Gah!”

Her eyes had turned pitch black, and black smoke oozed from her skin.

She had succumbed to corruption once again.

“Ugh... ugh...”

Sylvan flailed his arms, desperately looking to Greenheart for help.

‘Help me, Greenheart...’

But even Greenheart had transformed, striking Sylvan across the face with its corrupted branches.

“!”

Fear spread across Sylvan’s face.

Ariel saved him just in time.

“Purification.”

A soft yet resolute voice resonated as brilliant light enveloped Lina and Greenheart.

Soon, they returned to their normal forms.

“...Sylvan!”

Lina let go of Sylvan’s neck, looking shocked, and Greenheart quickly withdrew its branches.

“I... I’m sorry. I attacked you again, didn’t I?” Lina apologized, attempting to hug Sylvan.

But Sylvan stepped back, his face pale.

He even avoided the branch Greenheart extended toward him in an attempt to comfort him.

It was one thing to hold on to hope and push through the darkness, but it was becoming clear that he couldn’t rely on Lina or Greenheart.

After all, they might attack him again at any moment.

‘I can only trust myself,’ Sylvan thought grimly.

The dark aura blanketing the forest grew so dense that he could no longer see even a step ahead.

Lina and Greenheart became corrupted frequently now.

Every time, without fail, they attacked Sylvan.

As a result, he now clung closely to Ariel, refusing to stray from her side.

Sylvan’s gaze at Lina and Greenheart was filled with distrust and fear.

“I’m sorry, Sylvan... I didn’t mean to... I truly am sorry,” Lina said, her voice trembling.

Greenheart waved its branches in an apologetic gesture, but Sylvan

resolutely ignored them.

Moments ago, Lina had apologized and hugged him—only to suddenly pull a dagger from her thigh and try to stab him in the back.

“Stay away, both of you...” he muttered.

Having faced death several times in such a short span, it was no wonder his heart had closed off.

Meanwhile, Ariel decided she needed to take action.

At this rate, their progress was far too slow.

While purifying Lina and Greenheart wasn't difficult, the journey to the World Tree would take far too long at this pace.

Ariel cast a divine spell.

“Holy Light.”

A radiant orb of light floated above her head, casting a sacred glow that pushed back the surrounding darkness.

The spell, Holy Light, offered protection against the aura of darkness.

Within its radiance, Lina and Greenheart would no longer succumb to corruption.

“You won't be corrupted anymore,” Ariel assured them.

But Sylvan simply stared ahead with a resolute expression, as if silently thinking, ‘I don't trust anyone anymore.’

As Ariel predicted, Lina and Greenheart were no longer corrupted.

However, other corrupted ents and elves began to gather around them.

Though they couldn't step into the Holy Light's range, some of the corrupted elves began firing arrows.

Swish!

Each time, Lina deflected the arrows with her dagger or Greenheart extended its branches to shield Sylvan.

“The situation seems worse than I thought,” Lina remarked, scanning their surroundings.

“Even the elves who were in the sanctuary seem to have been corrupted. Look—Phaelan and Zaras over there...”

Phaelan and Zaras had once tended to meals and cared for children in the sanctuary.

Now, they wandered the forest, corrupted.

This meant the sanctuary was no longer safe.

Worse, the children were nowhere to be seen. None of the corrupted elves appeared to be children.

Sylvan, too, seemed unaffected, suggesting that children were immune to corruption. But that made it even more dangerous.

The children would be easy targets for the corrupted elves and ents.

“We need to hurry,” Lina urged.

Ariel nodded and quickened her pace.

While purifying the corrupted elves and ents here wasn’t difficult, their priority was to cleanse the World Tree.

They needed to eliminate the source of corruption as quickly as possible to ensure everyone’s safety.

“That way,” Lina pointed ahead.

There, the World Tree stood.

The World Tree was supposed to be a majestic entity that soared toward the heavens, its vibrant energy infusing the surroundings with life.

But what lay before them now was nothing of the sort.

It resembled a withered, rotten husk of a tree.

Its leaves had all fallen and withered, its surrounding spring polluted with blackened water that exuded a menacing aura.

“Ah...”

Both Lina and Sylvan let out anguished sighs.

Their faces were a mix of shock, sorrow, and despair.

Tears welled up in their eyes, and their fists clenched tightly.

The sight of the World Tree, an entity sacred and vital to the elves, in such a devastated state, was unbearable.

Ariel, however, continued forward, her gaze fixed on the tree.

‘This level of corruption won’t be cleansed by ordinary holy magic,’ she thought.

She would need a much higher-level spell.

“Stop!” A voice called out from the side.

A group of elves approached, led by Nameria, the leader of the elf tribe, and the elven elders.

They were adorned with sacred armor etched with symbols, shields that repelled darkness, and mystical bracelets that seemed to protect them from corruption.

Their clothes, however, bore the signs of battle—torn sleeves, bloodstains, and small wounds, suggesting a perilous journey from the sanctuary to this place.

“What do you intend to do?” Nameria demanded, stepping forward.

Despite her age, she was a commanding presence.

Her wrinkled face exuded wisdom and experience, while her sharp

eyes gleamed with determination and resolve.

In her hand, she held a staff made from the branches of the World Tree, its tip emitting a faint light that pushed back the surrounding darkness.

“I intend to purify the World Tree,” Lina responded politely, gesturing toward Ariel.

“A young elf who can wield holy magic...”

“What!” one of the elders burst out.

“What nonsense is this, Lina! Are you defying the prophecy?”

“I’m not, but...”

“The prophecy foretold that a hero would appear on the day of destiny to save the elves! That hero would bring light and hope, restoring peace! Are you claiming that this young elf is that hero?”

Lina couldn’t answer.

She thought it might be possible, but the tense atmosphere made her hesitate to voice it.

“Don’t interfere with fate! We must wait for the hero to come and fight against the darkness!”

“But we can’t just leave things as they are...” Lina pointed at the World Tree with a sorrowful expression.

The others followed her gaze and their faces darkened.

Even the elder who had shouted at her now seemed on the verge of tears.

“We... still... must follow the prophecy...” the elder mumbled.

At that moment, Ariel extended her hand and quietly uttered, “Pure Soul.”

The air twisted and vibrated.

A wave of dazzling white light radiated from Ariel's hand.

The light was so intense and brilliant that it seemed like thousands of stars had converged into a single explosion.

Everyone around her was overwhelmed by the radiance, unable to keep their eyes open, and had to step back.

The surrounding darkness melted away instantly.

The waves of light swirled around Ariel, growing stronger with each moment.

The wind roared, and the ground trembled.

Everything was engulfed in light.

Ariel, now a radiant figure at the center of it all, seemed almost divine.

It was as if the world bowed to her light, purified, and reborn.

Then, from her hand, a blinding pillar of light shot forth.

Boom!

The sacred beam enveloped the World Tree.

Chapter 103 : Elf Forest (5)

Ariel's 'Pure Soul,' unleashed toward the World Tree, was the ultimate holy magic that only a select few high-ranking clerics could cast.

By focusing an immense amount of divine power, it eradicated curses and karma embedded within the soul, restoring it to its purest form.

Although 'Pure Soul' was the most effective holy magic for purification, it was designated as forbidden by the cathedral.

This was because the spell consumed a vast amount of divine power instantly, often leaving the caster debilitated—or, in severe cases, costing their life.

However, for Ariel, none of this posed a problem.

Ariel's mana was infinite, and when converted, her divine power was likewise boundless.

Even after casting 'Pure Soul,' Ariel's expression remained serene.

Moments later, the pillar of holy light enveloping the World Tree began to fade.

A reverent silence fell over the forest.

Not even the sound of wind or rustling leaves could be heard.

The elves watched the World Tree with bated breath.

Soon, the light fully dissipated, revealing the World Tree's appearance.

The World Tree had regained its original state.

The once blackened bark returned to its original turquoise hue, and the withered branches stretched out robustly.

Lush green leaves flourished on every branch, and the surrounding springs filled with crystal-clear water.

The dark aura that had lingered around vanished without a trace, replaced by the vibrant energy of nature brimming with life.

A single ray of warm sunlight gently illuminated the World Tree.

“The- the World Tree... it’s back...”

An elven elder fell to his knees, tears of gratitude streaming down his face.

“Oh...”

Following suit, all the elves present slowly knelt down.

Lina, Sylvan, and even the elven leader, Nameria, offered prayers in reverence.

The scene evoked the image of devout believers praying in a grand cathedral—a fitting parallel, as the World Tree was the object of the elves’ worship.

The restoration of the World Tree spread rapidly throughout the forest.

Withered trees regained their vitality, dead grass turned green once more, and corrupted elves and ents were purified, returning to their original forms.

As the elves finished their prayers, they each rose and approached Ariel.

“Thank you... for restoring the World Tree...”

Neither the elders nor Nameria had believed that the hero from the prophecy could be Ariel.

After all, the prophecy stated that the hero would be ‘one who does not carry elven blood.’

Ariel, by all appearances, was unmistakably an elf.

But such details no longer mattered.

Ariel had purified the World Tree and saved the elves’ forest.

Even if she wasn’t the hero of prophecy, the elves were deeply grateful to Ariel for their salvation.

The elves celebrated the resurrection of the World Tree, reveling in a time of blessings.

Some elves sat under the shade of trees playing harps, while some ents danced in delight.

Elven children giggled as they ran around the World Tree, with ents lumbering playfully after them.

Lina led her troops to clear the shelters, while Ariel shared cake atop Greenheart’s back with Sylvan.

Amidst this joyful scene, the elven leader, Nameria, watched with a satisfied expression until her face suddenly stiffened.

‘Come to think of it...?’

A thought flitted through her mind.

It was the first line of the prophecy:

[...From the depths of the darkness, the power of the evil god Naxxis shall awaken.]

The evil god, Naxxis.

Nameria, who had once entered the Eternal Archives, had researched Naxxis extensively.

Naxxis was an ancient, corrupted god.

He had sought to destroy the world using the power of darkness, and the elves had fought against him.

But unable to withstand Naxxis's immense power, the elves had suffered heavy losses and were ultimately pushed to the brink of annihilation.

At that moment, the great elven hero Althea conceived a plan.

She proposed using the power of the World Tree to seal Naxxis.

The elves unanimously agreed, as they could not afford to succumb to Naxxis.

Thus came the fateful day of battle.

Althea faced Naxxis in front of the World Tree.

The fierce battle lasted for three days and nights, ending with Althea's victory.

Althea successfully sealed Naxxis using the power of the World Tree.

But there was a problem.

The seal could not last forever.

Though it would hold for now, it was certain that one day, the seal would break after many long years.

Yet Althea was not worried.

As the only elf capable of communing with the World Tree, she had heard its whispers.

The World Tree had foretold that when the seal on Naxxis broke, a hero would appear to save the elves.

This hero would not carry elven blood but would overcome the darkness and save the elven people...

Nameria's gaze shifted to Ariel.

Ariel was undoubtedly an elf.

Though she had purified the World Tree and saved the elves, it was clear she was not the hero of Althea's prophecy.

'If the seal of the evil god Naxxis were to break now...'

At that moment, a deafening roar shook the heavens and earth, and an ominous darkness engulfed the sky.

"What- what is this...?"

The elves looked around in shock and confusion.

Despite the World Tree's purified energy, darkness once again shrouded the surroundings.

A massive rift opened before the World Tree, leaking a black aura.

"Kyah!"

Young elves who had been playing nearby screamed, and the ents extended their branches protectively around them.

Nameria bit her lip.

She recognized this phenomenon.

It was certain. The seal on Naxxis had been broken.

From within the black mist, a colossal figure slowly emerged.

Glowing red eyes blazed fiercely, and sharp, horn-like bones jutted from its head down its back.

Its skin, cloaked in dark energy, was pitch black, radiating an aura of corruption.

The evil god, Naxxis.

"...The Elven Forest... it hasn't changed, has it?"

Naxxis slowly lifted his head, surveying his surroundings.

Massive black wings extended from his back, and he held an enormous sword, its edge jagged and sharp.

“But this ends now.”

Naxxis turned his gaze toward the World Tree.

His eyes burned with rage—rage born from the countless years he had been sealed by the World Tree.

“The Elven Forest shall meet its doom.”

Naxxis raised his sword high.

Dark energy swirled violently around the blade, spiraling upward like black mist.

The darkness spread rapidly, consuming the forest and blotting out the sky, plunging the world into shadow.

Naxxis, towering like a nightmare risen from the abyss, loomed over the World Tree.

The elves were paralyzed with fear, unable to think of resisting.

Except for one.

The wise elven leader, Nameria.

“Stop!”

She pointed her staff, crafted from a branch of the World Tree, directly at Naxxis.

“I will not allow you to harm the World Tree!”

Naxxis slowly turned to face her, amusement flickering in his glowing red eyes.

To him, Nameria was nothing more than a frail, elderly elf.

Her wrinkled face and thin limbs were laughable against his overwhelming presence.

A mocking grin spread across Naxxis's lips.

"Do you truly believe you can stop me, old elf?"

"I am Nameria, leader of the elves and a descendant of Althea, who sealed you."

"Hah!"

Naxxis burst into laughter.

"So, this feeble, pitiful elf claims to be Althea's descendant."

His gaze swept over the other elves, who stood trembling in the distance.

There were no heroes like Althea among them.

"How pathetic the elves have become since the days when they were strong enough to seal me. Althea would weep if she saw this."

Nameria's face flushed with anger at his words, though she knew he wasn't wrong.

The ancient elves had been mighty.

Strong enough to stride across the continent with pride.

Now, the elves merely hid in the forest, living in seclusion to avoid being enslaved by humans.

The glory of the past was gone.

Still, they lived peacefully in the Elven Forest.

Children played joyfully among the trees, and the ents quietly tended the forest.

Such peace was enough.

Nameria wanted to preserve that peace, even without the glory of the past.

With a resolute gaze, she stared down Naxxis.

“Though the elves’ power has waned, our will remains steadfast. I will never let you harm the World Tree.”

At that moment, others gathered around Nameria.

The elderly elven elders. Lina and her troops, who had arrived just in time. The towering ents.

All stood by Nameria, ready to face Naxxis.

Naxxis ceased his mockery and regarded them in silence.

“Fools. Do you think you can stop me? Your era is over. The World Tree, this forest, and the world itself will all vanish into my darkness.”

Black energy erupted from the tip of Naxxis’s sword, forming a massive cloud of darkness that loomed ominously overhead.

Its sheer presence threatened to consume the entire world.

Terror was etched on the faces of every elf and ent, death looming over them.

Yet none stepped back. Their expressions were resolute.

“All will kneel before my power.”

Naxxis brought his sword down.

At that moment, Nameria saw it.

A small elf with silver hair descending before her.

Chapter 104 : Elf Forest (6)

The ancient elves were beings of exceptional magical prowess and divine power.

At that time, human civilization and magic were not particularly developed, making the elves the most powerful race on the continent.

However, even they could not withstand the Evil God, Nakshis.

Nakshis' defenses were nearly invincible.

His body was shrouded in a dark aura that nullified the elves' attacks entirely.

Powerful mana arrows and holy magic alike merely dissipated into futility.

Only the hero, Althea, managed to wound Nakshis.

Wielding the holy sword Aetherion, imbued with the power of the World Tree, Althea succeeded in injuring Nakshis.

But it was meaningless.

Nakshis used the power of darkness to heal his wounds immediately.

No matter how valiantly Althea fought, Nakshis' injuries regenerated quickly.

In the end, there was only one solution.

Using the holy sword Aetherion and the power of the World Tree to seal Nakshis.

Without this, even the mighty ancient elves would have no means to overcome the Evil God Nakshis.

Nakshis was an absolute being, akin to a living catastrophe.

...Or so it had been. Now, he was lying on the ground, broken into two pieces.

Nameria blinked quietly.

What had just happened?

Moments ago, Nakshis had been swinging his sword.

His blade, split sharply at the tip, gleamed as black as the void, carrying a sinister energy that seemed capable of destroying everything.

The moment he brought the sword down, the end of the elves seemed inevitable.

Everyone would meet their demise against this unstoppable power.

But as Nakshis swung his sword, a young elf stepped in front of Nameria.

It was Ariel.

Muttering, "I just purified this..." Ariel reached for the handle of the sword strapped to her back.

Nameria clearly saw her grasp the hilt.

But she didn't see the moment it was swung.

One moment Ariel grabbed the hilt; the next, she was already frozen in the stance of having swung it.

Then, a massive shockwave struck Nakshis.

Boom!

The body of Nakshis, once nearly invincible, and his destruction-infused sword were both split into two and sent flying.

A shockwave swept through the area.

The violent winds threatened to uproot trees.

The young elves clung tightly to the ents, and even the larger ents struggled to stay upright.

The elderly elders couldn't even remain seated, tumbling over completely.

Amid the chaos, only Ariel stood in serene stillness.

After a moment, the shockwave subsided, and silence returned to the forest.

Ariel adjusted her posture and sheathed her sword on her back.

"W-What is happening? My power, my body..." Nakshis muttered in disbelief.

His deep, resonant voice was laden with shock.

"Im-impossible... This is... wrong..."

Nakshis now existed as only an upper body.

Using his arms, he began crawling toward where his lower half lay scattered.

He was trying to recover using the power of darkness.

But Ariel moved faster than Nakshis could crawl.

Approaching his lower half, Ariel casually extended a hand.

Nakshis' lower body vanished without a trace.

"?!"

Nakshis blinked in bewilderment.

A muttered voice reached his ears: "This might sell well..."

"Sell... sell? What... what are you doing? Who... what are you...?"

Just then, something struck the ground in front of Nakshis.

It was Nameria's staff, crafted from a branch of the World Tree.

When Nakshis raised his gaze, he saw Nameria glaring coldly down at him.

"What? You think the elves have grown weak?"

Nakshis had no response.

His body was severed, his sword shattered.

On top of that, his lower body appeared to have been taken 'for selling purposes.'

He could use the power of darkness to recreate his lower half, but it would take time.

Time the elves wouldn't give him.

Even if he did recover, could he withstand that sword strike again?

As Nakshis reeled in confusion, Nameria spoke.

"The elves have not grown weak. The one who's weakened is you."

"No, this... it's just that child was... absurdly..."

"Our ancestors lacked the strength to annihilate you. Sealing you was the best they could do. But we've spent all this time preparing. For you."

"No, this isn't because you're strong, it's just—"

"It's time to sever this ill-fated tie, Nakshis."

Nameria raised her staff high.

A mysterious green light, imbued with a sense of wonder, gathered before her staff.

"I will annihilate you."

Nameria lowered her staff, and a green light shot toward Naxsis's head.

Even for Naxsis, weakened with only his upper body remaining, there was no enduring Nameria's attack.

Though Nameria had aged, she was still a leader of the Elves and an exceptional mage.

The magic, infused with all her might, engulfed Naxsis's head and soon exploded.

The upper body of Naxsis, now headless, sagged lifelessly.

At last, Naxsis was completely destroyed.

"Wow!"

The surrounding elves cheered in unison, and the ents eagerly swayed their branches in celebration.

Nameria raised her staff to the sky and declared solemnly,

"Elves, live eternal!"

The cheers erupted into shouts of joy.

"Wow! Long live the Elves! Long live Lady Nameria!!"

Though everyone shouted so, deep down, they all knew the truth.

Even Nameria knew.

They hadn't really contributed much to this victory.

It was an unnamed young elf who had purified the World Tree and defeated Naxsis...

The Elven Forest regained its peace once more.

The traces of darkness faded, replaced by vibrant life and the energy of nature.

Elves and ents spent their days filled with joy.

Ariel, too, enjoyed leisurely moments amidst the elves' warm hospitality.

Wearing a floral crown crafted by the elves, she blended seamlessly into the forest, as if she had always been part of it.

Sylvan and Riana introduced her to the diverse flora and fauna of the forest.

As they passed by, elder elves praised Ariel as a hero, offering their respect and gratitude.

Meanwhile, the children clamored to swing Ariel's Ragnarok.

Of course, she did not permit it.

A festival was soon held in the Elven Village.

Decorations adorned the forest, and an array of food and drinks was prepared.

While elves sang and celebrated, Ariel savored a sweet pie made from luminaberries and drank refreshing elderflower juice.

She even asked one of the elder elves how ents consumed food.

"How ents eat? Well, ents don't have mouths; they absorb nutrients through their bodies. For example, like this."

The elder handed a cup of elderflower juice to an ent.

The ent took it and poured the juice over its body.

"This is how ents eat."

Ariel nodded in understanding.

It seemed strange, but she accepted it as a unique racial trait.

After the festival, Ariel visited Nameria's home.

She planned to leave the Elven Forest that night, and Nameria had asked her to stop by before she departed.

Knock, knock.

At Ariel's knock, Nameria soon appeared, peeking her head out.

"You've come. Come in."

Nameria welcomed Ariel inside and prepared tea for her.

"So, you plan to leave the Elven Forest tonight?"

"Yes."

"I see. You said you were on a journey, didn't you? Now that I think of it, my younger brother loved adventures too. Through his journey, he found his love and left the forest for good. Haha."

Nameria chuckled softly as she sipped her tea.

"That rascal Gaizen—I wonder how he's doing."

Ariel's ears perked up at the name.

Could it be that Gaizen?

The guardian of Elysion who protects the Evergreen Forest.

Now that she looked closely, there was indeed a resemblance between Gaizen and Nameria.

"By now, he's probably married, but he hasn't visited even once. It'd be lovely if he brought his wife to introduce her to me."

For a brief moment, Ariel imagined a giant dragon looming over the Elven Forest.

Of course, Elysion would never do such a thing.

“Anyway, I truly thank you for this. You are the hero who saved the elves. Ahem, it seems the prophecy was off. It was difficult to accept at first, but now even the elders acknowledge it. In fact, it’s something to celebrate. It’s better for the savior of the elves to be an elf rather than a human.”

Nameria handed Ariel a necklace.

“This is my token of gratitude.”

Ariel examined the necklace.

It was a beautiful silver piece with a pendant shaped like a leaf.

“It’s made from the melted leaves of the World Tree. It once belonged to Althea, the ancient hero. I found it recently in the eternal archives.”

“Thank you.”

Ariel bowed and placed the necklace around her neck.

Immediately, she felt a sense of calmness, as though it were no ordinary necklace.

“Let me tell you an interesting story about that necklace.”

Nameria smiled gently as she spoke.

“Althea was known as the chosen elf who could communicate with nature. She could hear the whispers of the World Tree, locate the holy sword Aetherion, and foresee events on the continent.

But, you see, Althea didn’t actually have the ability to communicate with nature.”

Nameria pointed to the necklace.

“She only pretended to. The necklace has the power to enable communication with nature. Althea stumbled upon it by chance and

used its abilities to appear as though she were the chosen elf.”

Ariel stared at the necklace in thought.

The ability to communicate with nature...

Did that mean she could talk to ents too?

“According to records, when Althea used it, she made physical contact with her subject. I tried it myself—placed my hand on the World Tree while wearing the necklace and heard its whispers right away. The World Tree, by the way, has quite the sharp tongue. It called Althea a fraud but insisted her prophecies were always accurate.”

Nameria chuckled.

“Looks like even the World Tree doesn’t know everything. Regardless, that necklace now belongs to you. It suits the hero of the elves.”

“Thank you.”

A short while later, Ariel left Nameria’s house.

She felt as though she had acquired an intriguing item.

Though she was curious to converse with the World Tree, she decided to return to the Evergreen Forest first.

After all, she could teleport to the World Tree anytime she wished.

With a flash of light, Ariel stood by the lake in the Evergreen Forest.

The sky was adorned with a radiant moon, and the surroundings were shrouded in tranquil darkness.

It was quiet, suggesting that everyone was asleep.

Rustle.

Something approached Ariel’s side.

She turned to find a wolf pup, one she had never seen before, standing nearby.

Chapter 105 : Ash

Moonlight bathed the tranquil lakeshore.

Ariel quietly observed the wolf pup.

It was so tiny, as though it had just been born.

More like a puppy than a wolf.

As Ariel crouched down and extended a hand, the wolf pup stared at her with curious eyes, tilting its small head.

Ariel smiled gently.

Where could this little wolf have come from?

The Evergreen Forest was home to many creatures.

Wolves, of course, but also bears, deer, foxes, and squirrels.

However, most animals avoided this lakeshore.

This place belonged to Elysion's domain.

In fact, the entire Evergreen Forest was Elysion's territory, but this lakeshore was particularly special—it was a favored spot for both Elysion and Lakia.

Animals instinctively understood that this lakeshore was the domain of a very powerful being.

So how did this wolf pup end up here in Elysion's domain?

Could it have lost its mother?

Or maybe... Ariel just wanted to touch it.

The wolf pup's fur, gray in color, looked incredibly soft and fluffy.

But the pup only stared at Ariel with curiosity, not coming any closer.

Ariel pondered.

Should she use telekinesis to pull it closer?

No, that would be too harsh—it might scare the pup.

Instead, she decided on another approach.

Ariel retrieved something from her inventory.

It was a small, round fruit—lumina berries, brought from the Elven Forest.

Lumina berries were a favorite of the elves, known for their sweetness when baked into pies, though they were also delicious eaten raw.

Placing a lumina berry in her palm, Ariel waited.

The wolf pup slowly approached, its steps clumsy and hesitant.

Sniffing the berry's scent with its twitching nose, the pup tentatively licked it with a tiny tongue, then wagged its tail gently.

Ariel offered the lumina berry to the pup, who began to chew it happily, closing its eyes in contentment.

Taking this chance, Ariel stroked the pup's head. Just as she had imagined, the fur was soft and warm.

After swallowing the berry, the wolf pup tapped Ariel's hand with its plump paw, as if asking for more.

Ariel took out a few more lumina berries and placed them in her palm, this time letting the pup eat on its own.

It eagerly licked her hand while munching on the berries.

Once the berries were gone, the wolf pup looked back up at Ariel, its

round eyes filled with curiosity and innocence.

Unable to resist, Ariel gently pulled the pup into her arms.

The pup, perking up its ears, settled comfortably in her embrace.

Ariel stroked its chubby belly, enjoying the soft and warm sensation.

The pup, seemingly pleased by her touch, let out a small purr and soon fell asleep.

The next morning, Ariel woke to the sunlight streaming down.

Around her, Lakia, Levana, and Lu had gathered.

Lu sat in the shade of a tree, sipping fruit wine, while Levana nibbled on desserts beside him.

Lakia, meanwhile, was chasing the wolf pup from the night before, now dressed in a rabbit costume.

“Why do you keep running away?! I just want to touch you once!”

Lakia’s frustrated voice rang out as the pup evaded her attempts to catch it.

It seemed she was having no luck.

Then again, Ariel knew that without the lumina berries, even she wouldn’t have managed yesterday.

And Lakia... well, she was a dragon.

The wolf pup instinctively feared and avoided Lakia.

“Huh? Ariel, you’re awake?”

Levana quickly approached Ariel upon noticing her.

“Oh! Ma’am!”

Lu, who had just emptied his fruit wine, flew over immediately.

“Ah! Lady Ariel!”

Even Lakia, in her rabbit costume, came running.

The three of them surrounded Ariel and began asking her about what had happened in the Elven Forest this time.

Ariel calmly recounted how she purified the World Tree and defeated Narkisys.

“Th-that’s...!”

Levana’s face was filled with astonishment.

“Narkisys... wasn’t that the Evil God from ancient times? The one who fought against the ancient elves...?”

Levana seemed to know about Narkisys.

The Evil God, Narkisys.

A being corrupted by the power of darkness that once sought to bring about the end of the world, but was ultimately sealed away by the ancient elves.

This story was quite well-known, even among those who weren’t saintesses like Levana.

Even Lu knew about it.

“As expected of you, ma’am. To defeat that Evil God...”

However, Lu wasn’t as shocked as Levana.

Considering everything Ariel had done so far, it wasn’t entirely surprising.

In fact, Lu thought Narkisys was simply unlucky.

Of all times for the seal to break, it had to happen while Ariel was in the Elven Forest.

From that moment, Narkisys's fate was practically sealed.

Meanwhile, Ariel turned her gaze toward a spot near a tree.

There, a wolf pup was sneaking some of Levana's desserts.

"That wolf... Is it someone we know?"

When Ariel asked, the atmosphere grew silent for a moment.

Lakia, Levana, and Lu exchanged glances before looking back at Ariel.

"Ma'am, that wolf is Ghost's pup," Lu explained.

"It seems... it's with Black."

Ariel looked blank for a moment, unsure how to respond.

The thought of 'Since when?' crossed her mind, but that didn't seem to matter much.

More importantly...

A smile spread across Ariel's lips.

Though it was a bit startling, it was undoubtedly a cause for celebration.

Besides, if it was Ghost's pup, wouldn't that mean she'd get to see it often?

That adorable wolf pup.

"I think you should give it a name, ma'am," Lu suggested.

Nodding, Ariel looked back at the wolf pup.

The pup had inherited the traits of both Ghost and Black, its fur a mix of gray shades.

In that case...

“...Smoky?”

Ariel spoke hesitantly, and the reaction from the others wasn't very enthusiastic.

Lu carefully opened his mouth.

“Ma'am, that one's a female...”

“Oh.”

If it's a female, the name Smoky didn't seem fitting.

Ariel began contemplating again.

Everyone watched her closely, curious about what name she'd choose.

Finally, Ariel smiled and said, “Ash.”

This time, smiles spread across everyone's faces.

Ash.

A perfectly normal name that suited the gray wolf pup wonderfully.

Ariel stayed in the Evergreen Forest for a while, enjoying peaceful days.

She hadn't decided on her next adventure yet, and, most of all, playing with the wolf pup, Ash, was fun.

Ash had a round face, round eyes, and even a round nose, with fluffy fur that made her irresistibly cute.

She was curious by nature, constantly exploring and causing quite a bit of trouble.

Once, after watching Ariel swim in the lake like a spinning top, Ash bravely jumped in herself, only to squeal in fright.

Another time, she ventured deep into the forest and bothered some bear cubs.

Though the cubs were similar in size to Ash, they didn't dare stand up to her—likely because Ash was a mystical creature.

That incident earned her a severe scolding from Ghost and Black.

According to Levana, mystical creatures possess great power and should never bully other animals.

After being chastised, Ash sulkily sought comfort in Ariel's arms.

Ariel gently stroked and comforted her, but the next day, Ash caused another incident.

She shredded Ariel's dragon plushie, Sparky, to pieces.

With trembling hands, Ariel painstakingly gathered the remains, which Levana mended and stuffed with extra filling, making Sparky much chubbier than before.

"I guess her teeth are bothering her," Levana remarked while stroking Ash's back.

"She must be teething."

Sparky wasn't the only victim.

Ash had also chewed off one of the ears of Lakia's rabbit costume.

Enraged, Lakia transformed into her dragon form, and Ash let out a startled yelp before darting deep into the forest.

Eventually, Black caught and brought her back.

"It'd be good to get her something to chew on," Levana suggested.

Ariel suddenly had an idea.

She reached into her inventory and pulled something out with a thud.

It was the lower half of Narkisys, the Evil God.

Levana recoiled in horror, while Ash turned her attention to the severed part of Narkisys.

Slowly, she approached the lower half, her eyes fixed on it.

Despite the ominous aura still emanating from the remains, Ash—being a mystical creature—was undeterred.

With a fierce growl, she leaped onto it and began gnawing energetically.

Though the lower half of Narkisys was much larger than Ash, she didn't hesitate.

As if determined to defeat a much larger foe, she persistently bit and tugged at it, her small paws working diligently, her tail wagging excitedly.

In a matter of days, the lower half of Narkisys was reduced to tatters.

It was a victory for the small mystical creature.

Chapter 106 : Southern Jungle

(1)

The serene lakeside of the Evergreen Forest was peaceful today as well.

Sunlight shimmered on the gentle waves, and a cozy breeze rustled through the leaves.

After finishing the sandwich lovingly made by Levana, Ariel turned to Lakia and asked if she could teach her magic.

“Of course, I can teach you! If that’s what you wish, Ariel!”

Lakia nodded enthusiastically with a radiant smile.

“What kind of magic would you like to learn? Shall we start lightly with Meteor Storm? Or Blizzard? Hmm, maybe Giga Thunder or Explosion...”

Engulfed in her enthusiasm, Lakia rattled off spells one after another.

Each was a high-level spell boasting incredible destructive power.

“Oh! For practical use, Rain of Apocalypse is probably best! If you’re planning to conquer the continent, mass destruction spells are essential! Like a Hurricane Tempest to wipe out the human empire in one go...”

“Lakia.”

Ariel quietly interjected.

“...I just want to learn basic elemental magic.”

“B-Basic elemental magic?”

“Yeah. I don’t really have plans to conquer the continent.”

“Oh...”

Lakia awkwardly scratched her head.

“O-Of course, I can teach you basic elemental magic too!”

She quickly adjusted her attitude, worried that Ariel might decide not to learn magic at all.

Thus, Ariel began learning basic elemental magic from Lakia.

As always, no complex processes were necessary.

Just by hearing the principles and formulas, Ariel was able to comprehend and wield all elemental magic.

Moments later, Lakia asked, “Shall we try some practical training now?”

“Sure.”

Ariel moved closer to the lakeside.

Levana, Ghost, Black, and Ash, who had been lounging under the shade of nearby trees, watched Ariel with interest.

As Ariel reached the lakeside, she extended her hand and gathered mana.

A tiny droplet of water began to form in front of her palm.

“Ah! You’re doing great, Ariel! That’s it!”

Though it was a very basic elemental spell, Lakia exaggerated her praise.

From Lakia’s perspective, it didn’t feel like she had taught much, so she took the chance to make herself seem more useful.

Meanwhile, Ariel stared curiously at the droplet of water forming in front of her palm.

Creating water out of nothing in the air seemed truly amazing.

It struck her how incredible magic really was.

With this, she could wash herself or quench her thirst anytime, anywhere.

Deciding to make the droplet larger, Ariel infused more mana.

The droplet quickly grew to the size of a fist.

As she added even more mana, it soon became as large as a person.

Ariel moved the water mass toward the center of the lake, continually feeding it mana.

The water mass kept growing bigger and bigger.

She then tried spinning it.

SPLASH!

A massive water column shot up from the center of the lake.

The towering column, seemingly piercing the sky, grew even larger and transformed into a truly overwhelming sight.

“Yes! That’s it, Ariel! You’ve got it!” Lokia cheered, jumping up and down in excitement, while Levana, who had been petting Ash nearby, looked on with a bewildered expression.

‘How is that basic elemental magic...?’

The water column Ariel had summoned was far beyond the level of basic elemental magic.

It looked powerful enough to engulf an entire human city in an instant.

As Ariel dispersed the water column into the sky, rain began to fall over the Evergreen lakeside.

Ash gleefully dashed around, and Levana used her Holy Shield spell

to protect her saintess robes from getting wet.

The scent of fresh grass lingered after the rain stopped.

Having tested water magic, Ariel decided to try fire magic next.

From her earlier test, she realized that as long as she could channel mana into a spell, mastering high-level magic wasn't strictly necessary.

She could adjust the power of her magic through application alone.

Of course, this was a fundamental concept of magic. No magician was unaware of it.

However, applying it often resulted in significant mana loss, and controlling magic wasn't easy, so mastering advanced spells was generally more efficient.

Ariel extended her hand again, preparing to cast a fire spell.

At that moment, a frantic voice called out from the other side of the lakeside.

“Big sister! Big sister, big sister!!”

Lu was flying toward her at high speed.

In his hands was a book larger than his body, which he seemed to carry with the help of some flight powder.

Otherwise, it would've been impossible for him to hold such a heavy tome with his strength.

“Please, look at this book!”

Flying straight to Ariel, Lu opened the book to a specific page.

The book was *The History of Giants* by the adventurer Eras, and the page Lu showed contained details of Eras's discoveries in the southern jungle.

Pointing at an illustration on the page, Lu exclaimed, “This picture!

Eras discovered it deep within the southern jungle at a giant's ruin. I deciphered it—it's actually a code!"

Lakia approached, curious.

"What's that book? Isn't it the boring one Lionel was reading? Where'd you find it?"

"Under Lionel's bed."

"Under his bed? How'd you end up there?"

"Well... I was just, uh, looking for fun stuff..."

Lu trailed off awkwardly and pointed back at the page.

"More importantly, this code! I deciphered it, big sister!"

Ariel stared at the illustration.

To her, it didn't look like a code at all—just a simple drawing.

"This drawing is a code left by the giants!" Lu declared excitedly.

"According to my deciphering, 'Only those who seek the truth shall open the gates of Asgard.' What do you think?"

Ariel tilted her head.

"...Asgard?"

"Yes! Asgard! That Asgard!"

Just as Ariel was about to ask what Asgard was, Levana spoke up from behind her.

"Asgard is a hidden world said to be inhabited by the ancient giants. While its existence hasn't been confirmed, it's believed to hold their culture and wisdom."

"Exactly!"

Lu nodded fervently.

“The ancient giants created a sanctuary for themselves, hidden from the outside world, and that’s Asgard.”

Lu pointed to the book’s cover.

“The author of this book, Eras, spent his life searching for Asgard, exploring the continent. But in his later years, he had to stop his adventures. His last journey was to the southern jungle, where he discovered this drawing, which I deciphered as a code. I’m certain, big sister—there’s a secret in the southern jungle leading to Asgard!”

Lu’s eyes sparkled as he asked, “So, what do you think about making our next adventure to the southern jungle?”

The southern jungle was quite far from the Evergreen Forest.

In between lay the vast Kaldora Desert, teeming with dangerous monsters like griffins and hydras, and lacking water and food—an almost impossible crossing for most.

But beyond the desert lay the jungle, where the ruins of the giants awaited.

Lu’s suggestion was clear: embark on an adventure to the jungle.

“Alright.”

Ariel agreed without hesitation.

Crossing the desert to explore the unknown jungle was an exhilarating prospect.

“But, Ariel...”

Lakia spoke up hesitantly.

“If it’s the south, I can’t go with you. That area belongs to the Dragon Lord.”

The Dragon Lord, the leader of all dragons on the continent, was the most powerful among them.

“The Dragon Lord governs the entire southern region. If another dragon enters without permission, it’s considered a breach of oath.”

Dragons each had their own territories and rarely intruded on others’ domains without urgent reasons.

While most dragons claimed a mountain range as their territory, the Dragon Lord, greedy as he was, had claimed the entire southern region as his.

The mood grew somber.

Both Ariel and Lu wanted to explore the southern jungle, but they didn’t want to leave Lakia behind.

“Maybe I can find another location. There must be more giant ruins somewhere. I’ll check this book again...”

Lu tried to sound optimistic as he flipped through the book.

But in truth, he had already read it countless times.

There was no other location.

The giant ruins existed only deep within the southern jungle.

“It’s fine,” Lakia said, shaking her head.

“I don’t need to go. Besides, my mother hasn’t fully recovered yet, and the wolf cubs still need care. Ariel, you should go with Lu. I’ll stay here with Levana in the Evergreen Forest.”

Levana also couldn’t join the adventure.

As a saintess, she had to return to her sanctuary at night, and with various cathedral events keeping her busy lately, going on an adventure was out of the question.

“Promise me we’ll all go on an adventure together next time, as long as it’s not the south,” Lakia said with a cheerful smile.

Ariel reached out and patted Lakia’s head.

“Thank you, Lakia. I’ll bring back a gift for you.”

“Something shiny?” Lakia’s eyes sparkled.

“...Yes.”

“Yay!”

Lakia leaped into Ariel’s arms, and Lu and Levana watched the two with warm smiles.

Chapter 107 : Southern Jungle

(2)

Levana was sitting by the lake, dipping her feet into the water while engrossed in knitting.

Knitting was one of the hobbies that Levana had loved since she was young. Every time she intertwined the threads, her heart would calm, and she found peace in it.

It was as if the worries inside her heart were tangled with the yarn and disappeared.

However, today, no matter how much she knitted, her worries didn't fade.

The situation was too serious for knitting to make it go away.

This morning, Levana had received shocking news from Archbishop Andersen.

"...Lately, the movements of the Demon King's army are unsettling."

Archbishop Andersen spoke with a grim expression.

"They say the northern Kastark family is already preparing for war. There's talk of forming a hero party in the imperial palace as well. It could happen soon. Saint..."

In fact, not long ago, Levana had hoped for the Demon King's army to invade the empire.

That way, the hero party would be formed.

If the hero party was formed, Levana, as the Saint, would be able to leave the cathedral and enjoy delicious food.

But wishing for war just to eat tasty food?

Levana felt quite childish as a Saint for thinking that way, but still, at one point, she had desperately hoped for it.

However, now that the situation had actually arrived, her heart was filled with unease.

The Demon King's army. War.

Many people would die. If they lost the war, the empire would fall.

Archbishop Andersen, Elder Bishop Javier, and even Delight, located in the heart of the imperial capital, would all disappear.

“I”

Had she been worrying too much? Her hand got pricked by the needle.

A sharp pain spread up her finger.

Levana blankly stared at the blood flowing from her finger.

If she used holy magic, the wound would heal instantly, but she just stared at the blood, lost in thought.

“What are you doing?”

At that moment, something plodded toward her. She turned her head to see the body of a white rabbit costume.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

It was Lakia.

Lakia was wearing only the body of the rabbit costume, with no headpiece. She must have dropped it somewhere in the forest, as Ash had been chewing on it earlier.

“It's nothing. Just a little prick from the needle.”

“Mm.”

Lakia plopped down next to Levana.

“By the way, I wonder if Ariel and Lu are doing okay.”

Lakia muttered.

“It’s a bit lonely without them.”

Ariel and Lu had left early this morning for an adventure in the southern jungle. By now, they would probably be heading toward the Kaldora Desert, having already passed through Elyssion’s lair.

“But Levana, what are you making?”

Lakia asked, looking at what Levana was holding in her hands.

“Are you making clothes?”

“Yes.”

Levana nodded.

“I’m making clothes for Ash.”

“For Ash?”

Lakia raised an eyebrow, looking puzzled.

“But Ash is a wolf. Why would a wolf wear clothes?”

For a moment, Levana glanced at the rabbit costume body Lakia was wearing.

Then what about a dragon...?

“I just want to dress him up.”

Indeed, Ash probably didn’t need clothes. Wolves had fur, and the Evergreen Forest was warm enough.

It was just Levana’s hobby.

She wanted to make cute clothes and dress Ash in them.

“So, what’s that?”

This time, Levana asked, looking at what Lakia was holding.

Lakia had been tapping the ground with a dark stick-like object.

“This? It’s the lower body of that evil god.”

“Ah... Nacxis’s? But why is there only one leg? Wasn’t Nacxis’s lower body supposed to have two legs?”

“It was split in half.”

“.....”

Levana slowly nodded.

It wasn’t hard to imagine that Ash had been so rough with it that it ended up split in two.

Nacxis’s lower body had become tattered, and the ominous aura had completely vanished. Now, it was nothing more than a toy for the young wolf.

It was hard to believe that it had once belonged to the fearsome evil god who tried to destroy the world.

“Where’s the other leg?”

Levana asked, and Lakia pointed toward the forest.

“Ash gave it to the baby bears. Lately, they’ve been getting along, so I guess he gave it to them as a gift.”

“Ah...”

Levana couldn’t help but chuckle.

What would people think if they knew what was going on here?

A young wolf and baby bears were gnawing on the corpse of an evil god.

And the world's most powerful creature, the dragon, was wandering around in a rabbit costume.

Even yesterday, Lakia had been practicing a silly dance, shaking her hips like a rabbit.

Levana suddenly felt that her anxiety and worries were being washed away.

The absurdity of the events happening in the Evergreen Forest calmed her heart.

Right, there was no need to worry just yet.

With that thought, Levana returned to her knitting, feeling more at peace.

A calm smile, like a lake, appeared on Levana's face.

The Kaldora Desert.

Commonly referred to as the "Sea of Twilight," this desert was a place of mysterious and beautiful landscapes.

At dusk, the vast sand dunes and endless desert plains turned a deep red, creating a scene that looked like the sea was sinking into the twilight.

At night, the sky filled with countless stars, and the desert was bathed in a soft starlight.

The starlight shimmering on the sand created the illusion that the sky and the earth were touching, adding to the mystique of the quiet desert night.

But the reason Kaldora Desert was called the Sea of Twilight wasn't just because of its beauty.

Behind its beauty, there was also deadly danger.

During the day, the extreme heat threatened life, and at night, the temperatures would drop below freezing, freezing travelers solid.

Occasionally, massive sandstorms would disorient travelers, and deep sand pits would swallow them whole.

Above all, the Kaldora Desert was home to dangerous monsters.

Griffons that appeared out of nowhere, the terrifying hydra near oases, and massive sand worms lurking in the sand, among others.

Because of these threats, the Kaldora Desert wasn't just a travel destination, it was considered a life-threatening place for adventurers.

Due to the extreme environment and unpredictable dangers, many travelers had disappeared without crossing the Sea of Twilight.

The Kaldora Desert was as dangerous as it was beautiful, a true test for adventurers...

"That's what it says in the adventure magazine, Sister."

Lu recited the contents of the magazine and looked at Ariel.

"Are you really going to cross the Kaldora Desert?"

"Yes."

Ariel nodded.

Having left ElySION's lair early in the morning, Ariel had quickly flown to the Kaldora Desert using telekinesis. While she could have gone straight to the southern jungle or the giant ruins, Ariel wanted to personally cross the desert.

She wanted to face the challenges and gain experience by crossing the desert.

"Well, okay, I've never crossed a desert before, so it should be fun."

Lu hopped onto Ariel's shoulder.

“Then let’s hire a guide in the village up ahead. The adventure magazine says a guide is essential for crossing the Kaldora Desert.”

Lu tapped the magazine with her hand.

The adventure magazine had been something Lu had secretly taken from under Lionel’s bed.

Ariel raised her gaze to look at the village ahead.

The village was called Sandspur.

Sandspur was a village located at the entrance of the Kaldora Desert, and it was a place where travelers crossing the desert would inevitably stop by.

In Sandspur, adventurers would buy supplies and hire experienced guides for their desert crossing.

“We need to buy camels.”

Ariel said, walking toward Sandspur.

The romanticism of crossing the desert was tied to camels, no matter what anyone said.

In Ariel’s mind, she was already imagining herself riding a camel across the sand dunes and sleeping under the starry night sky with the camel.

“Well, I don’t really like camels, but... they are strange creatures, aren’t they? With their bulging backs... and they say they store water in their backs, which sounds really weird.”

Lu muttered quietly.

After a while, Ariel and Lu arrived at the entrance of Sandspur.

At the entrance of the village, two large palm trees stood, and people were bustling between them.

Lu sniffed the air, taking in the distinctive aroma of spices flowing

from the village.

“Sister, should we eat first?”

“Mm, sure.”

Buying camels sounded good, but trying the unique food of Sandspur first didn't seem bad either.

Ariel and Lu followed the smell of spices and soon reached the village's central square.

In the square, there was a large oasis, surrounded by food stalls in every direction.

“Wow, Sister, look at that! The dish on that bread looks so delicious... Sister?”

Lu stopped speaking, looking around.

Ariel had vanished without a trace.

She had been right next to her just a moment ago but had disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Fortunately, Lu quickly found Ariel again.

Ariel was standing in front of a stall selling sweet desserts made from desert fruits.

Chapter 108 : Southern Jungle

(3)

The desert fruit dessert from Sandspur was affordable.

Moreover, it tasted good.

The sweet and sour flavor spread across her mouth.

Ariel had unknowingly bought a huge amount of the desert fruit dessert and placed it all in her inventory.

She wanted to eat it all right away, but she knew that if she did, she would get a food coma.

And if that happened, it would be difficult to go buy a camel.

Lu bought a dish with meat and spices piled on top of bread.

It was a unique dish only found in Sandspur, and according to Lu, she wasn't sure about the taste.

Ariel took a bite as well. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't quite to her liking.

Anyway, after a quick snack, Ariel and Lu decided to go buy a camel.

"Big sis, the camel market is to the east of the village," Lu said while reading an adventure magazine.

Ariel headed straight to the east of the village and soon arrived at the camel market.

The camel market had several tents set up, and camels inside the tents stretched out their long necks and watched the passersby with curious eyes.

Outside the tents, camel traders loudly advertised their camels.

“Little lady, how about this fine camel? It’s the best camel for crossing the Kaldora Desert in one go!”

“Our camels are obedient and healthy! They’re perfect for crossing the desert!”

Ariel’s eyes sparkled as she looked at the camels.

Each one had a different appearance, size, and color.

“Big sis, which one will you choose?” Lu asked.

At that moment, Ariel’s gaze stopped on one camel.

It was an elegant brown camel, tall with a well-balanced body and intelligent eyes.

“I like that camel,” Ariel said, walking over to it.

The camel owner greeted her warmly.

“Welcome. This camel is the best at navigating the desert. It’s gentle and intelligent, so even beginners can handle it easily.”

“I’ll take this camel,” Ariel said.

“Oh, good choice!” the camel owner exclaimed.

After making the purchase, Ariel reached out and gently stroked the camel’s neck.

The camel accepted her touch with a calm expression.

“Take care, Sahara.”

Ariel had already decided on a name for the camel.

After buying the camel, they headed west to hire a guide.

According to the adventure magazine in Lu’s hand, guides could be hired at the “Guide Association” located in the west of the village.

But as they headed west, Ariel suddenly stopped walking.

She had stopped in front of a store selling desert clothing.

Now that she thought about it, she needed to buy more than just a camel.

To cross the desert, it was essential to have clothing to protect from the scorching sun and sandstorms.

... Actually, it didn't matter much to Ariel, but for the sake of her emotions, she felt compelled to buy it.

It would be unthinkable to cross the desert without a turban or scarf.

Ariel entered the shop energetically and began looking at the various desert clothing.

She ended up buying a long beige robe, a turban, and a scarf.

After a while, Ariel was fully dressed like a desert traveler.

The clothes were a little too big for her, but she liked them.

Ariel then continued her way to the Guide Association.

The Guide Association was a sturdy, neat-looking building.

A large sign reading "Kaldora Desert Guide Association" hung above the entrance.

When she opened the door and stepped inside, she saw a spacious and comfortable interior.

A large map of the desert was hanging on the wall, and there was a bulletin board with information and safety tips for crossing the desert.

Several guides were sitting in chairs waiting, and on one side, an association employee was consulting with a traveler.

Ariel approached the counter.

The employee greeted her with a welcoming smile.

“Welcome. Are you planning to cross the Kaldora Desert?”

“Yes.”

“If you don’t have a specific guide in mind, would you like me to recommend an experienced guide?”

“Yes.”

The employee pointed to someone.

“That person would be a good fit.”

A middle-aged man was sitting where the employee pointed. He looked large and strong, with sun-tanned skin and sharp eyes that seemed weathered by the harsh desert winds.

“That man is Kasim, a guide who’s been crossing the Kaldora Desert for over 20 years. With him, you’ll be able to cross the desert safely.”

After hearing the employee’s introduction, Ariel and Lu approached Kasim.

Kasim stood up when he saw Ariel.

“Hello, little one. I’m Kasim. Are you planning to cross the Kaldora Desert?”

Ariel nodded.

“How many people are in your group?” Kasim asked again.

“Two,” Ariel said, pointing to Lu, who was perched on her shoulder. Then, she quickly added, “No, three. Including the camel.”

“The camel doesn’t matter. But are you sure it’s really just the two of you?”

“Yes.”

Kasim briefly scanned Ariel from head to toe.

Although she was dressed like a perfect desert traveler, her clothes were much too big, making her look a little awkward.

And her only companion was the fairy sitting on her shoulder.

He had no idea what she was thinking, trying to cross the desert like this.

“Hmm....” Kasim hesitated. Could he really take this little one across the desert?

It seemed like he'd have to look after her every step of the way.

Kasim scratched his head and glanced at the employee. The employee smiled knowingly, as if to say, “If you don't take the job, you're done.”

Kasim was a well-known guide in Sandspur, familiar with all the desert's main routes and capable of dealing with its many dangers.

He had helped countless travelers safely cross the Kaldora Desert, gaining a solid reputation.

But things had started getting difficult for Kasim when he began having issues with his legs.

At times, his legs suddenly stopped working, almost like they were paralyzed.

Whenever that happened, Kasim would rely on his camel to move, carefully hiding the fact that he had a problem with his legs.

He had no choice.

If word got out that a guide had leg problems, he would need to find another job.

No one would want to rely on a guide with a disability to cross the desert.

And Kasim didn't know how to do anything else. If he quit being a guide, he wouldn't be able to support his wife and two daughters.

So, Kasim kept coming to the Guide Association, but he only accepted jobs where there were many other guides with him.

That way, if his legs suddenly failed him, the other guides could step in and handle the situation.

But large caravans rarely crossed the Kaldora Desert.

Most travelers only needed one guide.

Because of this, Kasim had turned down many jobs, which led to a lot of complaints at the association.

They said Kasim only took profitable jobs.

Some even wondered if something was wrong with his health.

It wasn't uncommon for guides to have health problems, after all.

'If I don't take this job, I might really have to quit....'

Kasim sighed quietly and looked at Ariel.

There was no turning back now.

Somehow, he had to get this little one across the desert.

"Alright, little one. I'll be your guide. But there are a few things you need to promise me."

Kasim spoke to Ariel.

"First, don't disobey my instructions in the desert. Second, always stay together. Third, if there's danger, tell me right away. If you follow these three rules, we'll cross the desert safely."

Ariel nodded.

Wrapped up in her turban, with only her eyes visible, Ariel's gaze sparkled with excitement about crossing the desert.

That look made Kasim feel uneasy, but he pushed the feeling aside and smiled.

After all, he was a veteran guide.

A veteran guide never shows uncertainty in front of a traveler.

If he did, the traveler would become anxious too.

“Good. Now, rest well tonight, and we’ll meet early tomorrow morning at the village entrance to start our journey.”

Crossing the desert was best done early in the morning. The heat in the daytime was extreme, and visibility at night was poor.

“Make sure to bring enough water and some light food. As for your clothing... it looks perfect.”

Kasim’s words made Ariel straighten her shoulders proudly.

She was glad she had bought the clothing after all.

“See you tomorrow.”

Kasim gave Ariel a friendly pat on the shoulder and left the Guide Association.

He, too, had to prepare for the desert crossing.

After all, crossing the desert was a dangerous endeavor where anything could happen.

It was best to spend as much time with family as possible the night before the journey.

After all, they might never see each other again.

Chapter 109 : Southern Jungle

(4)

The next morning, Ariel, having slept at the inn, led her camel, Sahara, toward the village entrance at the crack of dawn.

Though the sun had not risen yet, Ariel was eager to begin the desert crossing and was in a hurry.

“...Ugh, sister, isn’t this a bit too early?”

Lu murmured, draped over Ariel’s shoulder.

The night before, Lu had drunk a local specialty, a Sandspur fruit wine.

She couldn’t even remember how much she had drunk, but the dizziness that lingered despite taking recovery powder suggested she’d overdone it.

“Anyway, even if we go now, that guide from yesterday is probably still...”

“Hey!”

At that moment, Kasim waved from ahead.

“You’re up early! Haha, that’s excellent. Well, if you’re crossing the wild desert, being diligent is a must. I was a little worried about you, but it looks like you’ll make it across without issue.”

Ariel smiled slightly at Kasim’s words, though it wasn’t visible under her turban.

“Shall we set off right away?”

“Yes.”

Ariel mounted Sahara, and Kasim did the same on his camel.

On Sahara’s head, the dragon doll, Sparky, sat perched.

Normally, Sparky flew around using telekinesis, but Ariel had tied it securely with a rope to avoid losing it in a potential sandstorm.

Ariel thought it actually suited the camel’s head quite well.

“What’s your name, little one?”

“Ariel.”

“Ah, Ariel. Do you remember the three things I told you yesterday?”

“Yes.”

In truth, Ariel didn’t remember, but it wasn’t a problem.

It hadn’t been anything important anyway.

It was just about listening to her instructions and avoiding strange behavior.

Soon, the sun began to rise dimly.

The vast desert slowly turned red.

Ariel was captivated by the awe-inspiring sight, and Lu, too, stared at it wide-eyed.

“Heh, impressive, right? When I was young, I too was entranced by this scene and decided to become a desert crossing guide. Now, well, to be honest, it doesn’t have the same impact, but back then, it was incredible.”

Kasim gulped down water from his canteen. While water was a precious resource in the desert, they had plenty, and there were oases along the way, so it wasn’t an immediate concern.

“Mm?”

Suddenly, Kasim's expression changed to one of surprise.

It was only now that he noticed Ariel's camel wasn't carrying any load.

There was only the doll hanging from Sahara's head.

"Uh, Ariel? Where's your luggage? Water and food, I mean."

Kasim asked, looking bewildered, and Lu, sitting on Ariel's shoulder, answered.

"My sister is a wizard, so she can make water herself. And she has plenty of food in her magic items. Don't worry about it."

"Aha... a wizard, huh? Impressive, you seem quite young."

Kasim thought Ariel looked younger than his two daughters.

But a wizard? He had heard there were plenty of young wizards at the Magic Tower.

Soon, as the sun fully rose, the desert started to heat up.

Ariel didn't mind the heat much, but Lu was struggling.

"Ugh, sister, I feel like I'm going to die..."

For a fairy accustomed to the cool forest, the desert's heat was nearly unbearable.

Lu hung limply from Sahara's hump, looking like a lifeless body.

Ariel, seeing this, cast a spell.

"Ice."

A basic elemental spell.

But Ariel applied it creatively, creating a small ice dome.

The ice dome was thin and transparent, but it was enough to block the desert's heat.

Lu quickly crawled into the dome.

“Ah, I can breathe!”

A happy smile spread across Lu’s face.

“Sister, thank you. You’re the best.”

Seeing this, Kasim couldn’t hide his amazement.

“Such impressive magic...”

Kasim had seen magic before in his life. He had witnessed fireballs and sharp winds being cast in battle.
But a small ice dome?

This was the first time he had seen such an efficient and creative use of magic.

Ariel’s ice dome stayed intact, even in the scorching heat of the desert.

Other wizards might struggle with the mana consumption, but for Ariel, it wasn’t difficult at all.

After a short rest, the group stopped near a rocky hill.

“Let’s rest here for a bit. We need to give the camels water,” Kasim said.

According to him, camels could drink large amounts of water at once, which allowed them to survive for days without needing more.

“Still, it’s better to feed them often to keep up their strength and health.”

Kasim and Ariel dismounted near the rocky hill.

Kasim filled a large bowl with water and gave it to his camel, while Ariel created water from thin air and let Sahara drink.

After the camels had drunk their fill, the group ate.

Kasim pulled out some dried rations, but Ariel retrieved fresh fruit, bread, and even desserts from her inventory.

“Eat.”

As Kasim took the fruit and desserts, he couldn't help but think to himself.

“Magic... isn't it too convenient?”

He smiled as he bit into the fruit, while Ariel removed her turban and scarf.

Her silver hair fluttered in the wind.

For a moment, Kasim froze, noticing her pointed ears.

“You... you're an elf?”

“Yes.”

Ariel nodded calmly.

“Ah, no wonder your magic skills are so impressive...”

Kasim had heard that elves were closely attuned to mana, which explained her proficiency.

Of course, this was a misconception.

Just because elves lived in forests didn't mean they were naturally adept with mana. That was simply an image humans had created.

“By the way, why are you crossing the Sahara Desert?”

Kasim asked, and Ariel replied that she was heading to the southern jungle for an adventure.

“Really? An adventurer, huh? Haha, a young elf adventurer. Sounds like something out of a book.”

Kasim smiled, remembering his own youthful dreams of traveling across the continent.

In the end, he had become captivated by the desert and started his

career as a guide, but he was satisfied.

He got to admire the beautiful desert frequently and took pride in ensuring travelers' safety.

"Well, it seems like it's almost over now..."

Kasim absentmindedly massaged his leg.

Even while riding the camel, his legs had gone numb several times.

It was beginning to hurt, and it would be hard to hide the problem for much longer.

His days as a guide were numbered.

Thinking of his wife and two daughters back home, Kasim's heart felt heavy, but he quickly shook it off.

For now, he had to focus on getting across the desert.

His main job was to ensure Ariel crossed safely.

After a brief rest and meal by the rocky hill, they resumed their desert crossing.

The sun was now fully up, making the desert even hotter, but Lu was comfortable in Ariel's ice dome.

Ariel gently stroked Sahara and surveyed the surroundings.

The vast desert stretched before her, with sand dunes and rocky hills scattered across the horizon. Occasionally, dry plants could be seen.

It was the exact desert landscape Ariel had imagined.

"Mm?"

At that moment, Kasim suddenly stopped his camel and stared ahead.

Ariel, too, stopped Sahara and looked in the same direction.

Far on the horizon, she could see brownish clouds approaching.

"A sandstorm!"

Kasim looked around frantically for a place to hide.

Fortunately, there was a large rock nearby.

“Let’s hide behind that rock!”

Kasim and Ariel urged their camels toward the rock.

The sandstorm grew closer, and the wind picked up, kicking up sand in all directions.

“Ariel, cover your face with your scarf! Stay close to the rock!”

Just then, Kasim fell to the ground. His camel had stumbled.

However, since he fell on the sand, he wasn’t injured.

He quickly tried to get up and remount his camel.

But then, he collapsed again, his legs not cooperating.

Ariel tilted her head and looked at Kasim, while Lu urged him to get up.

“What are you doing? Get up, quickly!”

“I’m sorry...”

A self-deprecating smile appeared on Kasim’s face.

“Can you take the camel with you? I’ll just stay here.”

“What?”

Lu frowned, and Ariel turned her gaze to the approaching sandstorm.

The storm was moving fast, the wind howling like it was about to tear their ears off, and rough sand was flying from all directions.

“Are you hurt?”

Ariel asked as she dismounted.

It seemed like she had no intention of leaving Kasim behind.

Kasim shook his head.

“I’m fine, just go to the rock. It’s dangerous if you don’t go now.”

But Ariel stood still, still watching him.

Kasim’s urgency grew.

“Damn it.”

Honestly, a sandstorm wasn’t that much of a threat.

As long as they covered their faces and stayed low, it wasn’t too dangerous, unless it was an exceptionally large sandstorm.

Chapter 110 : Southern Jungle

(5)

“W-What the hell is this...?”

Kasim blinked in disbelief.

He had traversed the desert for decades, but he had never seen such an overwhelming sight before.

The sandstorm that had been raging fiercely had come to an abrupt stop, suspended in mid-air.

It was as if time itself had frozen.

Through the particles of sand, the sun sparkled, revealing a mystical golden curtain.

Kasim turned his gaze to Ariel.

This impossible phenomenon was surely a magic spell cast by her.

Even the mighty forces of nature were helpless in the face of a young girl’s magic.

The sand particles, which had been still, gently began to trickle to the ground.

The golden curtain lifted, revealing the clear sky and the vast desert landscape.

“Hah.”

Kasim exhaled in exhaustion, and Ariel quickly walked up to him.

“Ariel, what the hell...?”

Suddenly, Kasim's eyes widened in surprise.

Something surged up next to Ariel.

It was a giant sandworm.

"W-Watch out!"

The sandworm opened its circular mouth, attempting to swallow Ariel whole.

Just then, a flash of blue light emitted from Ariel's hand.

Swish.

With a simple sound, the sandworm collapsed.

Ariel waved her hand, and the massive corpse of the sandworm disappeared without a trace, as though it had never existed.

Even then, Ariel never glanced at the sandworm.

Her gaze remained fixed on Kasim's legs.

Kasim's legs were twitching violently due to severe paralysis, and it hurt his pride.

He covered his legs with his bag and spoke.

"It's fine, this is normal. It's not an injury, more like a sickness. So, could you stop looking at me like that? I feel like a pathetic fool."

Ariel paused, contemplating, before pulling at Kasim's bag.

"W-What are you...?"

Kasim tried to hold onto the bag, but it was no use.

He was easily overpowered and the bag was quickly taken from him.

It felt like a humiliating loss.

A desert guide had to learn some basic self-defense.

That was essential to fend off bandits or monsters.

Kasim had trained in swordsmanship.

A thick machete hung from his camel, which he handled with considerable skill.

His two daughters thought their father was the strongest man in the world.

Natural disasters like desert sandstorms were unavoidable, but they believed Kasim could easily defeat any ordinary bandits.

But how would they feel seeing this?

A reliable father trembling in his legs and losing his bag to a little girl?

“G-Give it back.”

Kasim reached out, and Ariel casually dropped the bag beside her.

She then bent down and reached for Kasim’s leg before speaking.

“Divine Revive.”

In an instant, holy light poured from Ariel’s hand, seeping into Kasim’s leg.

Divine Revive was a high-level holy magic.

While it couldn’t cure incurable diseases, it could heal most ailments.

It required great divine power, so only high-ranking clergy could cast it, leaving them temporarily exhausted.

Though that didn’t apply to Ariel.

“W-What’s happening...?”

Kasim stared in shock at the changes occurring in his leg.

The power that had been drained by paralysis and pain was

returning, and Kasim slowly tried to stand.

Miraculously, his leg was sturdy enough to support his body.

The spasms and numbness had completely disappeared.

He could walk without any issue, and it even felt like he could run.

“My... my leg is healed...?”

Kasim asked in a trembling voice, and Ariel nodded.

“Wahahaha!”

Kasim burst out laughing loudly.

“This is... a miracle! How is this possible... Ariel, you’re truly amazing!”

Kasim lifted Ariel into the air and spun her around.

But he must’ve gotten dizzy, as both he and Ariel collapsed onto the sand with a thud.

“Hahaha!”

Despite the fall, Kasim couldn’t stop laughing.

On the desert that had once been plagued by the sandstorm,

His hearty laughter echoed for a long time.

Ariel’s astonishing feats didn’t end there.

A sudden griffon appeared, only to collapse with a sickening crack before it could even do anything.

A hydra near an oasis was strangled and collapsed in defeat.

Each time, Ariel approached the monster corpses, and they vanished without a trace, as though they had never been there.

Kasim found himself pitying the monsters, even though he knew

better.

Wasn't this a bit too much?

But he quickly scolded himself.

After all, they were monsters.

Monsters were dangerous creatures that attacked travelers in the desert.

If possible, it was best to eliminate them all.

In that sense, Ariel's actions should be praised.

Ariel's incredible powers didn't stop there.

When night fell and darkness enveloped them, Kasim took his post as lookout.

It was the guide's duty to stand guard while the travelers rested.

But Ariel casually waved her hand, and a transparent shield appeared around them.

"You're welcome, rest easy now. No one can get in."

Lu patted Kasim's shoulder and Ariel gave him a slight bow.

Then both of them casually lay down on the ground.

Ariel hugged the camel, Sahara, while Lu crawled into her clothes.

Kasim stared at them for a moment before lying down himself.

He used his bag as a pillow and gazed up at the starry sky, pondering.

'I feel kind of useless...'

Ariel's shield completely blocked out the cold.

The desert night was notorious for its harsh chill, but with Ariel's

shield, the surroundings felt like a greenhouse—warm and cozy.

For the first time, Kasim was able to enjoy a comfortable night in the desert.

The next day, their desert crossing continued smoothly and without any danger.

Thanks to Ariel's exceptional magic, there were no dangerous situations, and Kasim simply relaxed and enjoyed the desert journey.

'Such a peaceful journey...'

If Ariel were to become a guide, all the desert guides in Sandsprings would lose their jobs.

Her abilities were that perfect for desert crossing.

Finally, when they reached the edge of the desert, they were met with the dense jungle ahead.

Kasim turned to Ariel and spoke.

"We've arrived already. Ariel, thanks to you, this journey has been smooth sailing. I feel a bit embarrassed since I didn't do much, haha. And thanks again for fixing my leg. If you hadn't done that, I might've had to let my wife and two daughters go hungry. I truly appreciate it, Ariel."

Kasim slowly bowed his head to Ariel, and she smiled softly.

At that moment, Ariel felt she had made the right choice in becoming the protector of Levana.

Thanks to learning holy magic, she was able to help others, whether it was in the elf forest or with Kasim.

"You can sell the camels over there."

Kasim pointed toward a group of camel traders.

Once they left the desert, the camels wouldn't be needed, so travelers

would sell them here.

Ariel had known this from the start.

She affectionately petted Sahara's neck, her face tinged with regret.

Although they had only spent a day together, she had already grown attached.

The previous night, Sahara had been surprisingly comfortable to sleep with.

"Thank you for the ride, Sahara."

Ariel spoke as she led Sahara over to the camel traders.

Sahara, too, seemed reluctant to part, trembling and sniffing the air.

"Goodbye, Sahara."

When Ariel reached the traders, she retrieved the dragon doll, Sparky, from Sahara's neck and gave the camel one last affectionate pat.

The camel trader smiled fondly at her.

"Haha, you truly care about your camel. You're such a kind-hearted young lady."

The trader kindly took Sahara, and Ariel watched her go, her gaze lingering until Sahara disappeared into the tent.

Turning around, Ariel exchanged parting words with Kasim.

"Take care."

"No, I didn't do anything. You were the one who worked hard. Ariel, I know your abilities, but just in case, be careful in the jungle. Got it?"

Kasim patted Ariel's head, and she nodded quietly.

Although parting was bittersweet, the time they had spent together

would certainly remain a cherished memory.

Ariel waved goodbye to Kasim and, with Lu, turned toward the dense jungle.

She stowed away her desert attire and returned to her adventurer-like outfit.

As they entered the jungle, the hot desert air was replaced by the humid, cool atmosphere.

Ariel felt the soft sunlight filtering through the leaves and began using telekinesis to control Sparky.

Since Sparky had been stuffed with cotton, he was quite chubby now and moved a little slower on purpose—like a concept of sorts.

“Ah, the forest really is better, isn’t it, sis?”

Lu remarked, distracted by the flowers blooming around them, and Ariel inhaled the fresh scent of the jungle deeply.

At that moment, a huge object fell right in front of them.

Thud!

Startled, Lu quickly hid inside Ariel’s hat, and Ariel quietly looked up to see what blocked her path.

It was an imposing ogre.

With a massive frame and muscular build, its deep green skin exuded power.

The ogre looked down at Ariel with golden eyes and spoke.

“So, you’re the one who cast telekinesis magic in the Kaldora Desert, little elf!”

His booming voice caused the surrounding trees to shake, and the birds flew off in panic.

Ariel instinctively realized that this being was no ordinary ogre.

“My name is Jakalis, ruler of the southern region. You dare to cast magic in my territory so arrogantly? You will pay the price for this insolence!”

The ogre’s piercing gaze locked onto Ariel as he spoke.

“However, I will give you a chance to kneel and beg for forgiveness. If you fail to beg properly, I will hang your tiny body from a tree and feed you to the crows. Now, choose, little elf. Will you kneel and beg for mercy before me, or will you endure a severe punishment and end up as crow food?”

Chapter 111 : Southern Jungle

(6)

“...Sister, it seems that ogre, the one Lakia mentioned, might be the Dragon Lord.”

From under her hood, Lu cautiously peeked out and whispered to Ariel.

“He even mentioned being the ruler of the southern region, and most of all, the ogre’s eyes don’t shine like that—golden like that.”

Upon hearing Lu’s words, Ariel gave a small nod.

Somehow, even to Ariel, the ogre didn’t seem ordinary.

The ogres Ariel had encountered until now never spoke so fluently.

They just charged in with loud roars like “Ugh!” and attacked.

“Now, choose, little elf!”

The ogre, Jakalis, puffed up his chest and shouted. His massive muscles swelled, about to burst.

“If you kneel before me now and sincerely apologize with that cute face of yours...”

Taat!

In that instant, Ariel vanished from her spot.

Then she appeared right in front of Jakalis.

Transcendent speed.

Jakalis couldn't react in time. Before he could respond, Ariel's fist landed in his abdomen.

Perrrk.

Jakalis's thick belly, surrounded by muscles, shook as if disturbed by a sudden impact.

His large eyes bulged, and his body twisted unnaturally.

The next moment, Jakalis's enormous body was sent flying backwards.

It tore through trees, cutting through bushes, and disappeared completely.

A moment later, a distant crash followed by a cloud of dust rising into the air.

"S-sister..."

Lu slowly floated up from under Ariel's hood.

A look of disbelief was on his face.

"Ah, even so, he's the Dragon Lord... the leader of the dragons...?"

Dragons were the strongest beings on the continent.

And the Dragon Lord was the most powerful of them all.

Living for thousands of years, accumulating wisdom and strength, they were the absolute power of the continent.

To send such a being flying with a punch—no matter how strong Ariel was, this...

"Sister."

Lu soon spoke with a serious expression.

"At this point, we should just kill him."

Having touched the Dragon Lord, Ariel didn't know how the other dragons would react.

Since they had attacked their leader, the dragons would probably not tolerate this.

Dragons were a very proud race.

If that were the case, Ariel would have to face all the dragons of the continent.

"Of course, I don't think you would lose..."

From Lu's point of view, even if such a thing were to happen, Ariel wouldn't bat an eye.

Just like how she had split the Evil God Naksis in half, Ariel might end up sending every dragon that came at her to the afterlife.

But if that happened, there would be no dragons left on the continent, and the bigger problem was that Lakia was also a dragon, which would complicate the situation.

So the best course of action right now would be...

"Let's kill him, sister."

Erasing the evidence.

Ariel moved toward the direction where Jakalis had flown.

Her face was calm, as if she were just out for a walk.

Jakalis seemed to have flown farther than expected, but there was no concern about losing track of him.

The trees and bushes were broken and bent in one direction.

"Let's pull off his head first. Hmm, no... maybe piercing his heart with Ragnarok would be better..."

Lu was still insisting on killing the Dragon Lord.

“We kill him, hide the body in magical items, and no one will know. What happened here will be a secret between you and me. No, what happened here? We simply crossed the Kalodra Desert, passed through the jungle, and came to the giant tribe ruins, that’s all...”

But Ariel had no intention of killing Jakalis right away.

If Jakalis had attacked Lu or even touched Sparky, she might have considered it, but all Jakalis had done was ask for that apology.

Despite his threats, he hadn’t made any truly aggressive moves. He had only puffed up and tried to intimidate.

The reason Ariel attacked him...

It seemed to be because of Lakia.

Because Jakalis had prevented Lakia from going on an adventure.

The moment Ariel realized Jakalis was the Dragon Lord, Lakia’s sad face when she said, “If it’s the south, I can’t go with you,” flashed in her mind.

Without realizing it, Ariel had attacked.

Still, she had controlled her strength as much as possible. Was there still a chance to talk?

Ariel walked thoughtfully, and soon arrived at the spot where Jakalis lay.

Jakalis was sprawled carelessly under a massive rock.

Seeing the deep gouges in the rock, it seemed that he had crashed into it before falling.

“S-sister...”

Lu said quietly.

“He’s still awake, his eyes are open.”

Ariel was taken aback.

Jakalis's limbs were twisted in unnatural angles, yet his eyes were wide open.

"...He seems to be unconscious with his eyes open."

Lu's words eased Ariel's worry.

She had been concerned that he might have died from the impact.

"This is our chance, sister. Let's cut his head off now."

Lu urged Ariel.

A mere fairy urging the death of the Dragon Lord—it was something no other dragon would ever do, and if they found out, they would be furious.

Of course, Lu wouldn't have been so bold if it were anyone else but Ariel.

But with Ariel as her ally and her bond with Lakia, dragons didn't seem so intimidating anymore.

Unless they were in a situation where only the two of them were left.

"I won't kill him."

Ariel walked up to Jakalis.

"I want to talk first."

Then she began healing Jakalis with holy magic.

As holy light radiated from Ariel's hands, Lu asked.

"What if the conversation doesn't go well?"

Ariel didn't answer right away.

For just a brief moment, her eyes gleamed coldly.

The Dragon Lord, Jakalis.

He was an ancient dragon, one who had seen the birth of every dragon alive on the continent.

He had witnessed the rise and fall of countless races, and with his long life, he had experienced the passage of time in a way no other creature could.

But despite his vast wisdom, Jakalis had become weary of the endless cycle of life and death.

The longer he lived, the more detached he became from the world.

His soul, once filled with vitality, had become numb, even cold.

He had lost the essence of life.

In his quest for meaning, Jakalis wandered the continent, searching for something to give his life purpose.

Then, one day, he passed by a human village, and when the villagers saw him, they screamed.

“An ogre!”

At that time, Jakalis had polymorphed into an ogre.

There was no real reason for it.

Other dragons often polymorphed into elves or humans, but Jakalis preferred the form of an ogre. It was large and imposing.

The ogre was the most powerful predator in the forest.

The villagers were terrified and quickly closed their gates, grabbing weapons, and desperately trying to protect their village.

To them, life was everything—fighting to survive, showing love and attachment to one another.

Jakalis couldn't help but laugh.

Humans, who lived for less than a hundred years, were so desperately clinging to life?

It was pathetic. So incredibly pathetic.

But in that moment, something inside Jakalis awakened.

It was an instinct he had long forgotten.

Even Jakalis had known moments of danger in his past.

When he was a hatchling, he had once provoked an ogre and almost died.

Back then, he had fought for survival, learning the true value of life.

But over time, as he grew stronger and wiser, that sense of danger had faded, and life itself had become dull.

With a mighty roar, Jakalis charged toward the human village.

“Oh, he’s coming!!”

The villagers struggled to protect their lives, and their desperation reached Jakalis.

Of course, Jakalis did nothing in the village.

He simply leapt over the gates, roared, and ran circles around the village.

The villagers shot arrows and threw stones, but he ignored them. They couldn’t harm him.

But Jakalis wanted to feel something.

He wanted to experience the desperate longing for life in another being.

That intense emotion made Jakalis feel, if only for a moment, alive.

It was probably from that day on.

Jakalis began seeking out different races, stirring up their fear and survival instincts...

Click. Click. Click.

Jakalis slowly opened his eyes.

Something was poking his cheek.

To dare poke the cheek of the Dragon Lord, he must have been trying to get a response...

“Eh?”

What appeared before Jakalis was some kind of doll.

A fat and ugly dragon doll.

Chapter 112: Southern Jungle

(7)

Jacalis staggered and rose to his feet.

‘What happened...?’

He couldn’t understand why he was lying in such a place.

Mumbling.

At that moment, he saw a young elf in front of him.

The young elf, perched on a rock, had something in their mouth, mumbling with it.

In front of the young elf, a cake was floating in mid-air, and Jacalis realized it was telekinesis magic.

At that moment, Jacalis remembered.

Yesterday, someone had cast magic in the Caldera Desert.

Dragons are sensitive to magic, so Jacalis would know immediately if someone cast magic in his domain.

The magic cast in the Caldera Desert was telekinesis.

Telekinesis was originally a basic level of magic, but the mana used was far from basic.

An overwhelming amount of mana had been used for this telekinesis.

Jacalis grew excited.

There weren’t many beings on the continent who could handle such

vast amounts of mana.

A dragon might have no trouble, but since the entire southern region, including the Caldera Desert, was Jacalis's domain, no other dragon could intrude without permission.

That would be a violation of the oath.

It was certain that the caster wasn't a dragon; it must have been another race.

'It must be a high-level mage with some considerable skill. If someone like that begged for their life on their knees...'

A smile spread across Jacalis's face.

What Jacalis had learned while intimidating other beings was that the feelings he had toward those begging for their lives varied depending on who they were.

When a lowly monster like a goblin begs for mercy, it feels very different than when an intelligent being like a human or an elf does.

No, many lowly monsters like goblins don't even beg for mercy. They often lose their reason in fear and recklessly attack.

But humans and elves were different.

The more scared they were, the more desperate they seemed, and the more they had, the more intense that desperation became.

For example, the more wealth or status they had, the more they were attached to life.

Jacalis preferred those kinds of beings to beg for their lives.

It made the feeling of vitality even stronger.

The person who cast telekinesis in the Caldera Desert was undoubtedly a high-level mage.

That meant they likely had a high status and a strong attachment to

life.

Without hesitation, Jacalis headed toward the Caldera Desert.

Soon after, he found the person who had cast the telekinesis.

To his surprise, it was a young elf.

He had expected it to be an old human mage or, at the very least, a much older elf, but instead, it was a young elf.

‘Well, sometimes there are those born with talent...’

Jacalis decided to observe the situation first.

The young elf, using telekinesis, was breaking the neck of a griffon or strangling a hydra—handling magic far more skillfully than Jacalis had expected.

It was still child’s play to a dragon, but it was still quite impressive.

It seemed this young elf was heading into the jungle.

‘This works out well.’

Jacalis decided to wait in the jungle. He didn’t particularly like the hot desert anyway.

After waiting in the jungle for a while, he finally saw the young elf trudging toward him.

Jacalis immediately appeared in front of the elf.

“You were the one who cast telekinesis in the Caldera Desert, huh, little elf!”

‘...And then what happened?’

Jacalis frowned.

He clearly remembered intimidating the young elf, but beyond that, he wasn’t sure.

Had the young elf kneeled and begged for mercy?

No, perhaps not?

Had they fled?

‘Something important happened, but...’

At that moment, he heard a voice from the front.

“You’re awake.”

Jacalis jumped in surprise. Somehow, the young elf was right in front of him.

“Want some?”

The young elf floated the cake in front of Jacalis using telekinesis.

Without realizing it, Jacalis took the cake with both hands.

“Thank...”

He nearly said “thank you,” but barely managed to stop himself.

Jacalis’s face contorted in disgust as he threw the cake to the ground.

“How dare you offer me such food!”

He then stomped on the cake with his large foot.

For a moment, he thought maybe that was a bit much, but quickly dismissed the thought.

No matter what, Jacalis decided to continue intimidating the young elf.

“Remember my name well, little elf!”

Jacalis puffed up his chest.

His eyes gleamed golden, and a terrifying aura emanated from his body.

“My name is Jacalis, the ruler of the southern region and the leader of all dragons. Yesterday, you cast magic in my domain without any fear. So...”

“Sorry.”

At that moment, the young elf apologized.

Jacalis blinked in confusion.

This was an unexpected turn of events.

It was too early for an apology; the young elf had given it so easily that the situation had become tangled.

“I cast the magic in the Caldera Desert yesterday, and it was my fault. I didn’t know. I’m really sorry.”

The young elf apologized calmly.

Jacalis rolled his eyes, thinking hard.

‘This isn’t right...’

This wasn’t what Jacalis had wanted.

What he wanted was for the young elf to kneel and beg for their life.

But now, with this...

‘Ah.’

Then, Jacalis noticed a dragon figurine floating in mid-air.

Now that he thought about it, the figurine had poked his cheek with its stubby hand when he had first woken up.

In that case...

“Well, I’ll specially forgive you for using magic recklessly in my domain. You apologized properly, and you didn’t know. But that...”

Jacalis pointed at the dragon figurine.

“How dare you make a figurine of a great dragon and control it with telekinesis. This is a blatant insult to dragons, and as a Dragon Lord, I cannot let this slide. So, I will beat you up and throw you to the crows!”

“That figurine...”

“No, I will not accept your apology.”

Jacalis quickly interjected, worried that if the young elf apologized again, his resolve would waver.

What Jacalis wanted wasn't an apology; it was seeing the elf beg for their life.

But somehow, Jacalis didn't think the young elf would do that. In the end, there was only one option left.

“If you truly want to live, then fight me with all your might. If your skills are worthy of your life, I may spare you.”

Jacalis decided to attack the young elf.

Of course, he wouldn't kill them, but he planned to attack with enough force to make them feel a life-threatening danger.

Then the young elf would struggle to survive, and that struggle would bring Jacalis great pleasure.

“Now, here I come.”

Jacalis crouched down.

The young elf, seemingly resolute, nodded in response.

‘Heh, I hope you entertain me, little elf.’

With that thought, Jacalis lunged toward the young elf.

As he neared, a sudden memory flashed in Jacalis's mind.

“!”

It was the memory of the young elf's fist striking his abdomen.

In the southern jungle, there was a type of rock known as "Greensstone," a pale green rock formed from the fusion of plant life and minerals over thousands of years. It was resistant to moisture and decay and extremely durable, so it couldn't be destroyed by ordinary means.

But now, astonishingly, a large hole had been made in this Greensstone.

A massive monster, an ogre, was lodged inside.

The ogre's upper body was buried in the Greensstone, but its lower body dangled outside.

This ogre was Jacalis.

The ruler of the south and the Dragon Lord.

"Hmph."

Luga, arms crossed, smacked Jacalis on the rear and said,

"He passed out again, sis."

This was the second time.

The first time, he had been knocked out by Ariel's punch to the abdomen, and the second time, he had fainted after being slapped by Ariel.

Ariel was using telekinesis to extract Jacalis from the Greensstone.

It was so tightly wedged that it took considerable mana to finally pull him free.

Once Jacalis was out, his face was severely bruised.

It seemed like his upper body bones were completely shattered.

"Now, this is a bit pitiful."

Luga clicked his tongue softly.

“Even though he’s a Dragon Lord, he’s being treated like this. I think this might be the first time in his life.”

Ariel silently nodded in agreement.

Seeing Jacalis’s state, it was clear she had been a bit too rough.

But Ariel couldn’t help it.

Jacalis had insisted that she fight him with all her might, and if he thought her skills were worthy, he would forgive her.

Ariel did want to get along well with Jacalis.

After all, as a Dragon Lord, he was a superior to Lakia.

Besides, who knows?

If they hit it off, maybe Lakia would allow her to explore the southern region.

“Why did he charge in again? I’m sure he realized it when he got hit by your first punch. Why bother...”

“Well, this guy went and charged again, and this is the result...”

Ariel thought for a moment and then spoke.

“I think it’s his stubborn nature. He’s a Dragon Lord, after all.”

“Hmph, I see. He really is a Dragon Lord.”

“Maybe it will be a long fight.”

Ariel narrowed her eyes as she looked at Jacalis.

Dragons were an incredibly proud race.

And as the leader of those dragons, he wouldn’t give up after just one or two attempts.

“We

’ll need to continue our training to improve,” Ariel concluded.

Luga nodded.

Then they both started their work of healing Jacalis.

This time, Jacalis would be properly trained.

And he would hopefully learn not to rush into battles he couldn’t win.

Chapter 113: Southern Jungle

(8)

The father of all dragons and the one called the Lord...

I, Jakalis.

Why was I born into such a powerful existence, only to be trapped in the abyss of loneliness?

Looking down from the endless skies and the vast earth, I realize—
My greatness means nothing.

A thousand years pass, and my strong body remains unchanged.

Yet inside, I crumble like the sands of the desert.

Who would understand the depth of my agony?

My roar shakes the heavens and the earth, and my wings stir up storms.

But what does it matter?

Now that I have realized the futility of all this.

Oh, cruel fate,

You made me this strong, but you also made me this lonely.

After enduring thousands of years, I wandered in endless darkness.

Who could ever understand the weight of my existence?

With absolute power and knowledge, nothing can fill my emptiness.

I am a cursed being, one who does not even envy the stars of the sky.

There is no reason to fear me.

The loneliness I feel is deeper than anyone could ever imagine...

...

Today, I sensed magic in my domain.

A vast wave of mana from the Kaldora Desert.

It sounded like the thunder breaking an age of silence.

At first, I was filled with rage.

Who dares to invade my domain?

But soon, that anger turned into something else.
Curiosity? Expectation? Excitement?
I felt my heart race.
Has the being who will break my endless eternity finally appeared?
Whatever it may be, I will go.
To meet that being who has made my heart beat.

Jakalis' Diary –

“Stop, please stop...”
Jakalis kneeled and begged.
His enormous ogre form was still intimidating.
His arms were as thick as tree trunks, and the muscles covering his
body looked as solid as armor.
But in contrast to his overwhelming exterior, fear and pain filled his
golden eyes.

“I can’t... I can’t endure anymore...”

He didn’t know how many times this had happened.
At least dozens of times.

Ariel relentlessly put Jakalis through pain and then healed him with
holy magic, repeating the cycle.

“I’ll go again.”

Ariel whispered monotonously.

Just hearing Ariel’s voice now sent Jakalis into a state of panic.
He had tried to resist many times.

Casting high-level spells, exerting his strength, trying to run away.
But all of it was a futile struggle.

Ariel easily overpowered Jakalis, and he couldn’t help but feel how
powerless he truly was.

“Please... stop... stop...”

Thud.

Another powerful punch from Ariel.

Jakalis twisted in pain, losing consciousness.

Soon after, he regained consciousness along with the holy sensation.

“Please... I just want it to stop...”

Jakalis begged, hands clasped.

The loneliness and emptiness he had held for so long, the

meaninglessness of life, had all vanished.

At this moment, only one desire remained in Jakalis' heart.

Survival.

He only longed for the primal desire to live.

If he could live, if he could escape this pain, Jakalis felt like he would do anything.

"I'll go again."

But Ariel, with a blank expression, raised her fist once more.

"...Stop, you demon!"

Jakalis screamed, pressing his face into the ground.

"Please, stop, I want to go back to my lair... send me back to my lair..."

Finally, unable to watch anymore, Lu intervened.

"Sis, maybe it's time to stop..."

From Lu's perspective, Jakalis seemed to be in great agony.

Strike, heal, strike, heal.

If it went on any longer, Jakalis might truly lose his sanity.

"..."

Ariel slowly lowered her fist and approached Jakalis.

Jakalis shuddered.

The giant ogre trembling in fear before the tiny elf—

It was an odd and unsettling sight.

Fortunately, Ariel stopped striking Jakalis.

She quietly reached out and brushed the dirt off his face.

At that gentle touch, Jakalis couldn't hold back his tears.

"...Hah!"

It was finally over.

Relief and sorrow overwhelmed him.

How much pain and fear had he endured?

He wanted to live.

He wanted to return to his lair, alive.

The lair, which had always felt so dull and monotonous, was now

desperately missed.

“...”

Suddenly, Jakalis realized.

How peaceful those cursed, empty days had been.

And how great a blessing that peace was.

For the first time, he understood how precious the calm, uneventful daily life had been.

Breathing, feeling nature, existing in the world.

The cool breeze under a shaded tree, the sparkling sunlight on the water, the countless stars shining in the night sky...

None of that was a given.

It was a blessing bestowed upon Jakalis.

And other races, too, desperately longed for life in order to preserve such blessings.

“Do you want to eat?”

At that moment, Ariel asked.

A cake floated in front of Jakalis.

Having been beaten all day, Jakalis was starving and immediately opened his mouth wide.

The cake slid right into his mouth.

“!!”

Jakalis’ eyes widened.

The sweetness melting in his mouth.

It was blissful, wondrous.

It felt as though his soul was being healed.

Jakalis shivered with pleasure and swallowed the cake.

“Ah...”

A gasp escaped his lips.

Who would have thought that a simple piece of cake could bring such intense joy?

At that moment, Ariel offered him another piece of cake.

“Do you want more?”

“Th-thank you...”

Jakalis sincerely thanked her, then began devouring the cake.

Luckily, Ariel also offered him milk, so he didn't have to worry about choking.

The sweet cake and savory milk easily dispelled Jakalis' anguish. He had belatedly realized the simple happiness.

Jakalis made a vow.

He would never let this go again.

He would be thankful, over and over again.

Gulp, gulp.

The sky remained as blue as ever.

And the warm sunlight gently wrapped around Jakalis.

As though blessing his new future...

•

Ariel continued walking.

The thick undergrowth blocked the path, but it could not stop Ariel.

In the sky, various birds chirped, and small animals darted between the trees and the ground.

The peaceful and lively jungle forest.

Ariel closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

The fresh air spread through her body.

It felt as if she was becoming one with nature.

"Hm, sis, do you think he'll be okay?"

Lu, sitting on Ariel's shoulder, asked.

"I thought he might be a little off earlier..."

Lu was talking about Jakalis.

After devouring cake and milk from Ariel, Jakalis soon stood up, declaring he would return to his lair.

He said he wanted to write in his diary as soon as possible.

"There's so much to write today. I've realized so much. I'll probably be busy even after writing. First, I plan to water the flowers in front of my lair. It doesn't rain much there, so they're probably hungry.

After watering the flowers, I'll help the little birds build their nests. And..."

Jakalis spoke endlessly with a happy face about all the things he planned to do.

However, to Lu, it all seemed utterly useless, and definitely not something a Dragon Lord should be doing.

“Her name is Ariel, right? I’m really thankful. There was a little misunderstanding at first, but it turned out to be such a meaningful encounter. I’m so glad to have met you.”

“I’m happy too.”

Ariel smiled slightly as she spoke.

“But... by the way, is the entire southern region really your domain...?”

“Ah!”

At that, Jakalis quickly shook his head. A sheepish smile appeared on his lips.

“Not anymore. From now on, the southern region belongs to everyone. My domain is just my lair. Actually, my lair is too big for just me. I think I’ll have to move to a cozier place soon.”

“Then, is it okay for other dragons to come to the southern region anytime they want?”

“Of course! In fact, I think it’s great! If other dragons come, I’d love to share cake with them. Oh, speaking of which, I haven’t seen Elysion in a while. Should I visit her tomorrow? I wonder if his son and daughter are doing well...”

Jakalis’ tone and personality had completely changed.

His soft, affectionate manner didn’t quite match his fierce ogre face. Ariel might have thought differently, but Lu was sure that something had happened to Jakalis.

Maybe some part of his mind had broken...

“He’s a good dragon.”

Ariel said quietly.

At her words, Lu scratched her head and gazed off into the distance.

“Well, I guess it’s fine... He’s the Dragon Lord, after all. There’s nothing I, a fairy, can do by worrying.”

Rather than worrying, maybe it was a good thing.

From now on, Lakia would also be able to explore the southern region freely.

Ariel took another step forward, and Lu shook off his thoughts. Anyway, it was time to head toward the giant ruins deep in the jungle.

Lu felt his heart racing as he spoke to Ariel.

“Sis, maybe we should have some fruit wine...?”

Chapter 114: Southern Jungle

(9)

As they continued deeper into the jungle, the thick canopy of trees parted, revealing a wide river flowing across the landscape. Ariel stopped in her tracks, gazing at the scene in front of her. A vast river crossed the jungle, flowing leisurely. The river appeared to be several hundred meters wide, its turquoise waves sparkling in the sunlight.

“Whoa, it’s the Siland River, sis!” Lu shouted from her shoulder. “According to Eras’ book History of the Giants, we need to cross the Siland River to reach the Giant’s Ruins,” Lu continued.

A refreshing breeze blew across the river. Ariel began walking toward the Siland River.

“Eras used a canoe to cross the Siland River,” Lu added.

The mention of a canoe caught Ariel’s attention. For a moment, she imagined herself crossing the river in a canoe. The leisurely canoe cutting through the water, the warm sunlight shining down from above, and the distant chirping of birds. Ariel imagined rowing the canoe while Sparky flew around, and Lu sat on the opposite side, sipping fruit wine. It felt like a romantic and thrilling adventure scene.

“Well then, maybe we...” Ariel began, but trailed off. Come to think of it, there was no canoe. For a moment, she considered making one, but it seemed like too much trouble. It would take a fair amount of time, and honestly, she had no idea what a canoe looked like or how it was structured. It seemed that riding a canoe would have to wait for another time.

Ariel started preparing to cross the river.
Using telekinesis, crossing the river would be a piece of cake.
She could run across the surface of the water or fly above it.
But Ariel decided to swim across instead.
She would use the “spinning swimming technique” she had learned in the Lizardman Kingdom.
It seemed like it would be more fun and refreshing.

Just as Ariel was about to dive into the water, a huge shadow suddenly appeared beneath the surface.
A massive shape slowly emerged from the water, cutting through the surface.
It was a turtle... though far too large to be just a turtle.
It looked more like a small island moving through the water.
Its head alone was at least twice Ariel’s height, and its shell resembled a large hill.
The enormous turtle, having emerged from the river, slowly approached Ariel and stared at her with amber-colored eyes.

“The river is dangerous, elf child,” the turtle spoke.
To Ariel’s surprise, the turtle could talk.
“The current is swift and the river is deep. It’s safer to stay in the jungle.”
“...”

Ariel silently watched the turtle.
Its overwhelming size and ability to speak made it clear that this was no ordinary turtle.

“What’s going on? Why is a turtle talking?” Lu asked.
The turtle slowly blinked, then answered, albeit a beat late.
“My name is Theodoras. I am the guardian of this river.”
“Guardian? Does that mean you’re a divine beast?” Lu asked again, and as before, Theodoras answered slowly.
“Yes.”

True to its nature, the turtle spoke and moved slowly.

“Sis, I think this is the divine beast of the Siland River,” Lu said.
“Divine beast?” Ariel asked.

“Yes. I’ve never seen a divine beast before, but it’s mentioned in Eras’ History of the Giants,” Lu replied.

Ariel pulled the book from her inventory.
Lu quickly flipped it open and pointed to a page.

“Here. Eras wrote about encountering a divine beast in the Siland River.”

Ariel began reading the page Lu pointed to.

[Divine Beast, Theodoras]

The Siland River is as majestic as it is mysterious, but the most surprising being I encountered there was none other than the divine beast Theodoras.

Divine beasts are natural guardians created by the ancient gods, said to possess a lifespan of over a thousand years and great intelligence. Theodoras, the guardian of the Siland River, took the form of a colossal turtle.

When I first met him, I was overwhelmed with awe.

His amber-colored eyes were unmistakably extraordinary.

However, as we spoke, my illusions were gradually shattered.

Theodoras was surprisingly greedy.

He demanded my food, especially anything sweet, and practically took it by force.

His behavior was more like that of a brazen beggar than a noble divine beast.

What was even more surprising was his intellectual capacity.

The riddles he proposed for a game were terribly disappointing.

His questions were far too simple, and conversely, he couldn’t even solve a basic riddle.

His thoughts and actions were slow, and conversing with him was a test of patience.

The most troublesome part was his excessive competitive spirit.

He refused to accept losing, and the riddle game went on endlessly.

Fortunately, his slow movements allowed me to escape, but had I been in a canoe on the river, it would have been difficult to avoid his persistence.

I warn future adventurers.

There is a ‘special danger’ lurking in the Siland River called Theodoras.

If you encounter him, don't give him food, and refuse to play his riddle games.

Use his slow pace to quickly escape the situation.

Perhaps the real danger of the Siland River is not the rapids or the monsters, but this foolish and stubborn divine beast.

“...”

After reading the book, Ariel and Lu were at a loss for words.

In the meantime, Theodoras slowly approached and spoke to Ariel.

“Elf child, do you have any food? Something like sweet fruits? I've been craving such things.”

It was just as the book described.

Theodoras, on first meeting, was already shamelessly asking for food.

“...Sis, let's just ignore him,” Lu said quietly.

Lu's face clearly showed that she didn't want to get involved with Theodoras.

“He's no good,” Lu muttered.

But Ariel continued to quietly observe Theodoras.

The turtle blinked slowly, looking almost like a docile creature.

“I have plenty of sweet food,” Ariel said.

At those words, Theodoras' large eyes slowly widened.

His amber eyes sparkled with anticipation.

“Then... could you...” he began.

“But I'm not giving it to you,” Ariel interjected.

“...”

Theodoras blinked slowly again, and his eyes reflected disappointment a beat later.

“Do you really want sweet food?”

“Sure,” Ariel said again, and this time, his eyes grew even bigger.

“I want sweet food...” he began.

“If you want it, I'll give it to you,” Ariel replied.

“Thank you so much...”

“However, there's a condition.”

Theodoras, unable to follow the speed of Ariel's words, paused for a moment.

"A condition...?"

"Take me across the river," Ariel said.

For a moment, Theodoras appeared to be deep in thought.

Then, slowly, he opened his mouth.

"I also have a condition. We must play a riddle game."

"..."

Although Theodoras spoke confidently, it was clear that his condition made no sense.

Ariel had already asked for a ride across the river in exchange for sweet food, but now Theodoras was adding a condition.

Just as Eras' book had said, Theodoras was shameless.

Moreover, judging by his bold expression, it seemed he didn't even realize how shameless he was.

"...Sis, just ignore him. There's no need to deal with such a foolish creature," Lu said, now speaking openly.

Lu didn't care that Theodoras was listening.

Despite Lu's words, Theodoras continued to stare at Ariel confidently. It was as though time had stopped.

"Fine," Ariel said, nodding.

Playing a riddle game wasn't difficult.

Theodoras' slow speech was annoying, but riding such a huge divine beast across the river was a rare experience.

Ariel could tolerate it for a little while.

She pulled out an assortment of desserts from her inventory.

Cakes, macarons, cream buns—Ariel's carefully chosen best desserts spilled onto the ground.

"Eat first," Ariel said.

Before she even finished speaking, Theodoras had already started moving toward the food.

Lu cursed at his shamelessness, but Theodoras, pretending not to hear, buried his large face in the desserts.

Since Theodoras ate slowly, they had to wait for quite some time. Lu lay on his shell, sipping fruit wine, while Ariel sat beside him, quietly watching him eat.

Satisfied with the desserts, Theodoras' amber eyes shone with happiness.

"Theodoras, what kind of abilities do you have?" Ariel asked.

After a while, Theodoras answered.

"I can speak."

"And?"

Theodoras thought for a moment before responding again.

"I can live a long time."

"And?"

"I'm wise."

"..."

Ariel nodded.

Even as a divine beast, it seemed Theodoras didn't have any particularly special powers.

He could speak and live a long time—that was about it.

Soon after, Theodoras finished all the desserts.

Despite Ariel's inventory containing more, Theodoras asked if there was any more.

Lu shouted, "How much longer are you going to eat, you shameless turtle!" and stomped on his shell, while Ariel simply said there was no more.

In truth, there was plenty of dessert left in Ariel's inventory.

But giving him more would just mean waiting even longer.

"It's a shame there's no more. It was such sweet food... Maybe later..." Theodoras began.

"Let's do the riddle now," Ariel said.

"Start with your question."

Theodoras smiled slowly.

Though sweet food was nice, it seemed he enjoyed riddles as well.

Of course, it took some time for him to come up with the riddle, so Ariel took the opportunity to wipe the cake cream off his mouth and sat beside him, waiting.

A moment later, Theodoras asked the riddle.

"What shines at night, twinkles in the sky, and can grant wishes?"

"....."

This too was exactly as it was written in Eras' book.

The riddle Theodoras asked was so simple that even a child could

solve it.

Chapter 115: Southern Jungle

(10)

“Star.”

When Ariel answered, Theodoras paused for a moment.

It was as though Ariel had answered too easily, leaving him flustered.

But soon, a confident smile spread across Theodoras’ face.

“Wrong.”

“?”.

Ariel tilted her head.

Something that shines at night, twinkles in the sky, and can be wished upon.

It was definitely a star.

But he said it was wrong?

Theodoras slowly opened his mouth.

“The correct answer is magic. Magic shines at night, twinkles in the sky, and can grant wishes...!”

Theodoras giggled to himself.

His laughter was so slow that it seemed as if only he was experiencing time moving slowly.

“.....”

Ariel’s expression hardened.

This was clearly unreasonable.

Of course, magic can also shine at night, twinkle in the sky, and grant wishes, but if that was the case, the riddle would have no end.

Most of all, when Ariel said “star,” Theodoras definitely looked flustered.

That meant Theodoras himself thought the answer was “star,” but when Ariel got it right, he was denying it.

Shameless and cowardly.

“Seriously, what kind of guy is this? This is so petty!”

Lu once again stomped on Theodoras’ shell with force, but Theodoras didn’t budge, only flashing a bright smile.

“Too bad, elf child. Now it’s your turn to ask a question.”

At Theodoras’ words, Ariel sighed softly and opened her mouth.

“Short arms, but cute, with a nice beard, and excellent at crafting weapons—what race is this?”

At Ariel’s riddle, Theodoras became serious.

He looked deep in thought.

Without thinking, the answer was clearly dwarf.

It was an easy riddle that even a child could solve immediately.

But Theodoras kept pondering.

A silence descended around them.

Lu, with his arms crossed, anxiously tapped his feet, and Ariel waited patiently.

It took a long time before Theodoras spoke.

“Could you give me a hint?”

“.....”

For a moment, Ariel’s lips trembled slightly, and Lu began to feel tense.

“You... if you don’t want to become turtle stew, do it right... our sister gets really scary when she’s mad...”

Despite Lu’s warning, Theodoras repeated once more.

“Could you give me a hint?”

“...They live in mines, and they don’t get along with elves because they destroy forests.”

Ariel gave a blatant hint, but Theodoras still couldn’t answer.

Well, he couldn’t answer, but what was worse was that he shamelessly kept asking for more hints.

“Could you give me a hint?”

“The answer is dwarf.”

Eventually, Ariel gave the answer herself, and Theodoras wore a delayed, surprised expression.

Theodoras looked at Ariel with a slightly aggrieved look but soon smiled again.

“Since we both couldn’t answer, it’s a draw. Then I’ll ask another riddle...”

In the end, the riddle game with Theodoras went on for three rounds.

And each time, it ended in a draw.

Because Theodoras cleverly changed the answers to avoid admitting defeat.

For example, when Ariel answered “rain” to the riddle “What falls from the sky, wets the ground, and flows into rivers and seas?”, Theodoras changed the answer to “snow.”

And when Ariel asked riddles, even very easy ones, Theodoras couldn’t get them right.

“We always drink this to live. It’s invisible, but it’s everywhere. Without it, many creatures can’t survive. It suffocates you.”

The answer was “air,” but Theodoras only asked for hints while thinking deeply.

Even when Lu shouted, “What you’re breathing through your nose right now!” nothing changed.

“Another draw. Then I’ll ask another riddle...”

“No.”

Finally, Ariel decided to give up on the riddle game.

It seemed like it would never end at this rate.

“Forget the riddle. I want to cross the river. If you take me across, I’ll give you this.”

Ariel took out a large chocolate cake from her inventory.

The rich, dark-colored cake looked extremely sweet.

It was a cake Ariel had gotten from the capital, Delight, and had treasured.

“.....!”

Theodoras’ face brightened at the sight of the cake.

His eyes sparkled, and his mouth opened in a wide grin.

“That, are you really giving that to me?”

Theodoras asked in an excited voice.

Ariel nodded.

“I’ll give it to you. But first, take me across the river.”

“Then, I’ll eat it first...”

“No. You’ll get it after we cross.”

No matter how divine Theodoras was, Ariel still didn’t trust him.

He might eat the cake and then challenge her with another riddle.

“.....”

Theodoras had a conflicted expression, and Ariel used telekinesis to

make the cake hover in front of him, enticing him.

“That cake? It’s full of rich chocolate cream inside. It’s so smooth that it melts on your tongue the moment you bite into it.”

The cake floated slowly around Theodoras, circling him.

In response, his eyes spun in circles.

“All you have to do is take me across the river. Then, the cake is yours.”

Ariel whispered languidly.

“What do you think?”

Her sweet, tempting voice.

Even Lu, who normally didn’t care about desserts, was staring at the cake absentmindedly.

Theodoras closed his eyes for a moment.

Then, as if making a decision, he nodded.

“Alright.”

Upon hearing the answer, Ariel smiled faintly and stopped the cake.

It was at that moment.

ZAP!

Theodoras swiftly jumped up, snatched the cake with his mouth, and started running away.

Ariel and Lu were left blinking in confusion.

“...That guy... he’s incredibly fast, sis?”

Just now, Theodoras’ movements were extremely quick, and even now, he was running at a very fast speed.

His feet were almost invisible, moving that quickly.

Of course, it didn’t matter.

Ariel lightly stamped the ground, and in the next moment, she appeared in front of Theodoras.

“!!”

Theodoras hastily stopped, quickly swallowed the cake, and smiled brightly as if nothing had happened.

Ariel asked in a trembling voice.

“Theodoras... you’re going to take me across the river now, right?”

Then Theodoras blinked his large eyes once before speaking to Ariel.

“Let’s play another riddle game.”

At those words, Lu quickly hid inside Ariel’s hat.

Deep within the jungle, the Siland River was an extremely quiet place.

The soft sound of the wind rustling the leaves, the distant chirping of birds, and the gentle flowing of the river created an eerie silence.

Sometimes, the sound of fish jumping to the surface could be heard, but it quickly disappeared into the quiet again.

The Siland River flowed slowly, as if time had stopped, and the only thing visible was the pure, untouched nature...

BOOM!

Suddenly, a huge explosion tore the sky and shook the earth.

A shockwave spread along the river, as if the world itself was splitting in two.

The surface of the water violently churned, sending a column of water into the air, and the surrounding trees shook, screaming as they were uprooted.

The peaceful calm of the Siland River instantly turned into a scene of raging disaster.

At the epicenter of this change stood a single girl.

Her silver hair fluttering in the wind.

It was Ariel.

As usual, Ariel wore a calm expression, but if you looked closely, her eyebrows were slightly furrowed.

She looked slightly angry.

In Ariel's hand was a sword larger than her body, which was half-embedded in the ground.

It was the sword she had drawn after Theodoras suggested another riddle game.

The aftermath of that was the disaster that had just occurred.

Ariel pulled the sword out of the ground and began dragging it behind her as she walked toward Theodoras.

Scrape...

The eerie sound of the sword dragging on the ground echoed ominously.

It seemed to foretell Theodoras' fate.

Theodoras, with his large eyes wide open, stared at Ariel without moving.

The shameless smile he had been wearing vanished, and only fear remained in his eyes.

Ariel slowly, but surely, approached Theodoras.

Her elf-like cute face remained the same, but the aura around her was cold and merciless.

Every step Ariel took seemed to shake the earth, and it felt as if even the air was being pushed away by her presence.

Theodoras opened his mouth to speak, but only a short, dry groan escaped his throat.

Finally, when Ariel reached Theodoras, she stopped and stared at him intently.

Her eyes were red, as if filled with blood.

Her gaze seemed to pierce through Theodoras' very soul.

"Theodoras... you're going to take me across the river, right?"

Ariel asked once more.

Her voice was gentle, but inside it was an undeniable, chilling power that one could not resist.

Theodoras trembled and barely nodded.

Ariel stared at him for a moment, then slowly sheathed her sword.

The heavy aura that had been pressing down began to dissipate.

"Good."

Finally, Ariel smiled faintly and hopped onto Theodoras' shell.

"Please take care of me, Theodoras."

"....."

Theodoras, with trembling legs, began to move forward with difficulty.

Chapter 116: Southern Jungle

(11)

Carrying Ariel on his back, Theodoras suddenly stopped as he approached the river and muttered.

“I... I really don’t want to cross the river...”

Ariel tilted her head in confusion.

“Why?”

“Because I’m scared...”

“Pffft.”

Lu scoffed.

“Aren’t you the guardian of this river? How can you be afraid of it? Are you lying again?”

“No, really, I’m scared... There’s something scary in the middle of the river...”

Just then, Ariel slid down Theodoras’ shell and gently touched his face.

“The river isn’t scary, Theodoras. You can do it.”

“No... that’s not it, really, there’s something scary in the middle of the river...”

“You can do it.”

Even though Ariel kept encouraging him, Theodoras’ expression remained unchanged.

It wasn’t just that he was scared of the river.

There was indeed something terrifying in the center of the river.

“I... I really can’t cross...”

“Theodoras.”

Ariel spoke quietly.

“But you’ve already eaten my cake, haven’t you?”

“.....”

Theodoras blinked his eyes in shock. Ariel sighed softly.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do. I guess I’ll have to take my cake back.”

“.....?”

For a moment, Theodoras wondered how she could take back something that had already been eaten, but when he saw Ariel’s cold expression, he understood immediately.

‘She’s going to... cut me open...!’

Theodoras had no other choice.

The river was scary, but Ariel was scarier.

After all, he had witnessed her unleash a disaster earlier.

It was better to cross the river than to be split open here.

“... I’ll cross the river.”

Theodoras, powerfully swimming through the Siland River, was surrounded by white foam. The turquoise water sparkled in the sunlight.

Theodoras stretched his neck, holding his head high. On top of his head, Ariel stood with her arms wide open.

“I’m flying, Lu!”

Ariel said softly.

A cool breeze swept across her face, and her hair fluttered in the wind.

“Oh, I really feel like I’m flying.”

Meanwhile, above Ariel, Lu stood with his arms spread wide, mirroring her.

“We’re flying, sis! We’re free!”

Ariel and Lu stood still, closing their eyes to savor the moment.

The breeze brushing their faces and the warm sunlight filling the air — it really felt like they were soaring through the sky, a sense of elation flooding them.

Meanwhile, as Ariel and Lu enjoyed the moment, Theodoras continued paddling furiously.

Theodoras' expression wasn't exactly joyful.

He was still scared of crossing the river.

This fear stemmed from the ominous events that had been occurring in the middle of the river.

A while ago, when Theodoras was crossing the river as usual, he suddenly felt like something enormous was watching him from the deep waters.

It was a feeling of dark, unexplainable dread, an overwhelming presence that even Theodoras, who had lived in the Siland River for a long time, had never felt before.

He had even seen a massive shadow moving beneath the water afterward.

At that time, he had been so terrified he couldn't get a good look, but it was definitely a giant, writhing creature.

There had also been strange sounds.

A deep sigh, or maybe a low wail— it sounded like a massive beast was howling from the riverbed.

This sound echoed day and night, constantly creeping Theodoras out.

The most decisive event, however, had been the whirlpool.

Not long ago, Theodoras had witnessed an unbelievable sight.

Without any rain or wind, a huge whirlpool had suddenly appeared in the center of the river.

The whirlpool had seemed to swallow everything around it, pulling at everything violently.

Frozen in place, Theodoras had stared at the whirlpool blankly.

It had stopped after a short while, but Theodoras couldn't forget the shock he had felt that day.

He was certain.

There was something dangerous lurking deep in the Siland River.

It was much bigger than Theodoras, a dark and perilous creature.

By the time Theodoras reached the center of the river, he had started to speed up.

He thought that something might be lurking at the bottom of the river, and he wanted to pass through quickly before it could do any harm.

But before he could even gather his thoughts, dark clouds began to gather in the sky, and a torrential downpour started.

Swoosh!

This wasn't anything unusual. The jungle was known for its rapid climate shifts, and sudden heavy rain wasn't rare.

However, this storm felt particularly intense.

Theodoras pushed himself harder to cross as quickly as he could.

“It’s really coming down,” Ariel said as she sat on Theodoras’ head.

The downpour might have made someone else panic, but Ariel spoke with a calm voice.

“Theodoras, aren’t you tired?”

Ariel wiped the sweat from Theodoras’ brow as she asked.

Theodoras blinked slowly, then kept paddling without a word.

He was exhausted.

He had been swimming at full speed since he entered the river.

But now, all he could think about was getting out of here as fast as possible.

The rain only grew heavier.

The swollen river tossed Theodoras back and forth, and he struggled to maintain his balance.

If he were any other creature, he would have been swept away by now, but as a divine beast, Theodoras held his ground.

This was manageable...

Suddenly, a deep and ominous sound echoed in Theodoras’ ears.

It was a low, resonating growl that seemed to come from the very bottom of the river.

It sounded like an ancient monster awakening from its slumber.

The sound grew louder, vibrating the entire river.

Theodoras was gripped by a terror that nearly stopped his heart, but he paddled even harder.

Then, Theodoras realized something.

The water around him was swirling rapidly, forming a huge, rotating circle.

It was the same whirlpool he had seen earlier.

In an instant, Theodoras felt the riverbed beneath him shift as if it were collapsing.

It felt like a giant mouth opening, and the center of the river was beginning to sink.

Panicking, Theodoras paddled even more desperately, but it was no use.

The massive whirlpool easily pulled him in.

“Aaaaah!”

Theodoras screamed as he felt something slowly rise from beneath the water.

It was an enormous darkness.

At first, it was just a vague silhouette, but slowly, its form became clearer.

It resembled an octopus.

Its size was unimaginable.

“!!”

Theodoras stared in horror at the creature, and it, in turn, fixed its enormous eyes on him.

“What... what is this...”

His heart pounded wildly.

This creature was more terrifying than anything Theodoras had ever faced.

Its massive tentacles wriggled, rising out of the water.

The tentacles wrapped around Theodoras’ body, and he struggled violently.

“Ah, no!”

Theodoras bit at the tentacles, using his powerful jaw and steel-like teeth to tear through them.

But no matter how much he bit, the tentacles continued to rise in greater numbers.

Soon, Theodoras lost strength and began to be pulled under.

Beneath the river, the creature’s mouth lay open, waiting.

Its mouth was lined with sharp, needle-like teeth.

‘I’m going to be eaten...’

Theodoras was certain of it.

There had never been a creature in the Siland River that could consume Theodoras.

He was big, and his shell was tough.

But this creature was so enormous, it could probably swallow Theodoras in a single gulp.

With trembling hands, Theodoras reached for his head.

And there, he felt Ariel.

“Run, elf child.”

Theodoras grabbed Ariel and threw her with all his might.

Despite being exhausted, Theodoras was able to throw Ariel far due to her small size.

Ariel soared through the air, while Theodoras was dragged deeper into the river.

“.....”

A faint smile appeared on Theodoras’ lips.

As death loomed, memories of his time in the Siland River flashed before his eyes.

The most vivid one was from when he was still young.

He had been an herbivore, grazing by the riverbank, when he saw some sweet fruits hanging from a tree and decided to climb it.

But he fell, and because he was weak back then, he couldn’t flip himself back over.

That was when a passing giant tribe member found him and helped him.

The giant picked Theodoras up, gave him the fruit, and taught him a game of riddles.

For days, Theodoras and the giant played riddles, enjoying their time together.

But happiness, like all things, didn't last forever.

The giant had to leave, without explaining why or where he was going.

And so, the giant crossed the river and disappeared, never to be seen again.

'I wish I could meet him again...'

Now that Theodoras had grown, he had learned many riddles that he could share with the giant.

If they met again, the giant would surely be amazed by his wisdom.

Theodoras raised his head slowly.

Before he knew it, the creature's mouth was right in front of him.

"By the way, I'm not very tasty."

Theodoras spoke to the creature.

It didn't seem like the creature was listening, but Theodoras still asked his final riddle.

"Do you know what the most delicious food in the world is?"

As he closed his eyes, he felt the terrifying presence of the creature's jaws.

"....."

In the darkness of the water, Theodoras' smile remained.

Chapter 117: The Southern Jungle (12)

Ariel's sword swung effortlessly, slicing the creature cleanly in two.

Its massive jaws split apart, releasing a torrent of dark blood.

The creature, now divided into two pieces, began sinking silently.

The tentacles wrapped around Theodoras unraveled and slipped back into the darkness.

As Theodoras stared blankly at the scene, he suddenly felt a soft sensation in his hand.

"Let's go."

Ariel had come closer and was holding his hand.

Theodoras nodded, and the two swam together, hand in hand, across the river.

Whoosh!

The rain outside the river continued to pour relentlessly.

Ariel climbed back onto Theodoras's shell, and Lu, flapping his soaked wings, hurried over.

"Sis!"

Lu landed on Ariel's shoulder and spoke excitedly.

"That creature just now—I think I know what it is!"

"What is it?"

"It's a Kraken. I read about it in an adventure magazine."

Hearing this, Ariel pulled an adventure magazine from her inventory, shielding it with magic to protect it from the rain.

Lu quickly flipped through the pages and pointed to a section titled *“Encyclopedia of Ancient Legendary Creatures.”*

The Abyssal Overlord, Kraken

The Kraken is a monster said to have existed in ancient times, residing in the deepest and longest rivers.

It resembles a fusion of a massive snake and an octopus, stretching hundreds of meters in length and wielding powerful tentacles.

Its body is gray, covered in thick, dark, shimmering skin.

A giant eye sits on its head, appearing as if it contains the abyss itself, and its gaze alone is enough to paralyze with terror.

The Kraken's tentacles are strong enough to crush boulders and never release what they seize.

Sharp, hook-like protrusions on the tentacles' surface make its grip even more secure.

The Kraken's torso houses a large mouth filled with rows of jagged teeth.

Though it spends most of its time in a deep slumber, it awakens under specific conditions, such as during a solar eclipse or a great flood.

The Kraken stirs rivers into massive whirlpools, dragging everything into its maw as food.

Its roar shakes the river itself and instills terror in those who hear it.

Defeating the Kraken is no easy feat.

It is nearly immortal, regenerating quickly no matter how much of its body is severed.

The only way to kill it is to annihilate it entirely in a single strike.

“What do you think, Sis? That creature was a Kraken, wasn’t it?”

Lu asked eagerly, and Ariel nodded.

According to the book, the creature Ariel had just sliced in two was indeed a Kraken.

“Wow, to actually encounter a legendary ancient creature—it’s incredible!” Lu exclaimed in delight.

“But... it’s kind of a shame. It was so deep underwater that I couldn’t see it properly—Sis?”

Lu stopped mid-sentence, noticing Ariel unsheathing her sword again.

“Why are you pulling out your sword...?”

In an instant, Ariel’s sword gleamed with a blinding light.

Dozens of silver arcs spread outward, followed by *thud, thud, thud*.

They were severed tentacles.

“?”

Lu raised his gaze.

Tentacles were emerging once more, piercing through the river’s surface.

At the same time, the river began spinning into another massive whirlpool.

“S-Sis! It’s not dead yet!”

Lu shouted in panic, and Theodoras quickly moved to retreat.

“We must annihilate it in one strike,” Ariel murmured.

As the book described, the Kraken would regenerate unless it was

completely destroyed.

KUOOOOO!

A deafening roar erupted as the Kraken resurfaced, its massive form emerging from the depths.

Water sprayed everywhere as the monstrous body loomed over them.

Countless tentacles writhed toward the sky, while the Kraken's ominous red eyes glowed menacingly.

The ancient beast towered over the river, exuding an oppressive presence.

Its tentacles churned the water into a violent whirlpool, shaking everything around it with tremendous force.

KUOOOO!

The Kraken let out another earth-shaking roar, its sound reverberating like an echo from the abyss, instilling pure terror.

“Th-The elf girl!”

“Sis!”

Theodoras and Lu froze in panic, but Ariel remained calm, casting her telekinesis spell.

Slowly, the Kraken's massive body began to rise, as if defying gravity itself.

Its tentacles flailed in resistance, but Ariel's telekinesis was absolute.

An immense aura of mana surged from Ariel, enveloping her like a torrent, lifting the Kraken higher and higher into the air.

Soon, its colossal shadow blocked out the sky.

“What... is this...?”

Theodoras stared at the levitating Kraken in utter disbelief.

Its enormous size was terrifying—a mountain-like form with countless serpent-like tentacles writhing.

But what shocked him more was the fact that this monstrous creature was being levitated by the power of a single girl.

“Ugh, it’s grotesque,” Lu muttered.

Unlike Theodoras, Lu, now accustomed to Ariel’s immense magic, was unimpressed.

He simply grimaced as he observed the Kraken’s horrifying form.

“Ugh, I hope it doesn’t haunt my dreams. Sis, can I sleep in your arms tonight?”

“Sure,” Ariel replied without hesitation.

She had already prepared the spell needed to annihilate the Kraken in one blow.

The air around her began to vibrate violently.

Mana condensed visibly, forming a blue mist that swirled around her.

The oppressive energy left Theodoras and Lu gasping for air as if gravity had multiplied.

Finally, Ariel extended her hand, chanting a spell.

“Magic Missile.”

A beam of blue light shot from Ariel’s hand, tearing through the sky toward the Kraken.

The surrounding air trembled, and the river surged violently.

Theodoras braced himself desperately, while Lu instinctively dove into Ariel’s hat.

The beam engulfed the Kraken entirely, growing brighter and brighter until the creature’s form dissolved into the light.

KRRRAAAAGH!

A final, anguished scream echoed before silence fell.

Moments later, Ariel lowered her hand.

The blue light faded, and the Kraken had vanished completely.

Even the dark storm clouds above were erased by her magic, leaving the sky clear.

Sunlight poured down warmly, and the river returned to its calm, serene state.

After defeating the Kraken, the group resumed their journey across the river.

To comfort the tired Theodoras, Ariel pulled a macaron from her inventory and offered it to him.

“You did well, Theodoras.”

Theodoras swallowed the macaron in one bite, his amber eyes sparkling with joy.

Ariel handed a bottle of fruit wine to Lu as well.

“Great job, Lu.”

“Wow!” Lu cheered, kissing Ariel on the cheek before downing the drink.

“Ahh, there’s nothing like a drink after a battle,” he said with a satisfied grin.

Though Lu had done little during the fight, Ariel didn’t seem to mind, and sat on Theodoras’s head while slurping cream buns.

Soon, Theodoras asked Ariel.

“Would you like to play a riddle?”

“

Ariel hesitated a moment, then nodded.

“Just this once, though. You come up with the questions.”

“Okay.”

Theodoras continued to wade through the river, speaking quietly.

“What race has the largest feet in the world?”

“The giants.”

Ariel said the answer right away.

Of course, she didn’t expect it to be the right answer.

Theodoras wouldn’t approve of any answer anyway.

She could have said “ogre,” or “ogre born with very large feet,” or “kraken,” which she had seen earlier.

But Theodoras’s response was surprising.

“Correct.”

Ariel was slightly surprised, and Lu shook her head.

“A wise child.”

Ariel smiled a small smile at Theodoras’ words.

Beside her, Lu spoke up.

“Well, you’re finally admitting the answer. I wish you would have done that from the beginning. In the future, just accept the consequences.”

“.....”

Theodoras remained silent. He looked lost in his own thoughts.

“Hmm, giants, by the way. Strange coincidence. My sister and I are on our way to find the giants.”

But then Lu’s next words made Theodoras’ eyes widen.

“You’re going to find the giants?”

“Yes.”

“Ho, do you think you can take me with you?”

Theodoras asked impatiently.

Lu frowned.

“You? But I don’t think you’d be much help.”

“Maybe I can help. I... I’m....”

Theodoras searched desperately for something to say.

Then Ariel spoke up.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Eh, sister, you’re taking him with you?”

Ariel looked at Lu.

“Why?”

“Because.”

Ariel gently patted Theodoras on the head.

“Because he’s cute.”

“!”

“!!”

Both Lu and Theodoras froze, their faces filled with shock.

A moment later, Lu’s expression stiffened, while a bright smile spread across Theodoras’s face.

“You’re quite cute too, little elf,” Theodoras said, reaching out with his short arm to gently stroke Ariel with his fingertip.

Ariel closed her eyes and smiled at the warm touch.

Lu, however, furrowed his brows and pushed Theodoras's sturdy arm away.

"D-Don't touch my sister like that, you big turtle!" Lu shouted, his voice brimming with both protectiveness and jealousy.

But Theodoras was unfazed. Instead, he reached out and gently patted Lu as well.

"You're adorable too, little fairy."

"....."

Lu suddenly fell silent.

Shortly after, an awkward smile crept onto his face, and the tips of his ears turned a bright shade of red.

The Hero's Party:

That morning, as always, Levena pretended to head to the sanctum for prayer but instead stepped through a portal to the Evergreen Forest.

These days, she spent more time in the forest than in the grand cathedral.

Every day, she arrived early in the morning and only returned late at night.

At the cathedral, they praised her devotion to her sacred duties while expressing concern for her health.

In truth, however, Levena spent her days leisurely in the Evergreen Forest.

She busied herself making clothes for the wolf pup Ash, strolling through the woods, or swimming in the lake.

With Ariel and Lu off on an adventure, the only one Levena could talk to was Lakia.

Lakia, too, spent her time alone by the lake, except for the wolves.

Her brother Lionel had gone off to the Dwarf Mountains, and her mother, Elyseon, had moved deeper into the forest with her guardian, Gaizen.

“They didn’t want anyone disturbing their precious alone time,” Lakia had said.

Even Ghost and Black had grown even closer since Ash was born.

Ash, of course, was cared for by Lakia at the lake, while Ghost and Black had retreated deep into the forest and rarely appeared.

Levena mused that Ash might have a sibling soon.

Today, the lake at the Evergreen Forest was as peaceful as ever—or at least it should have been.

“?”

Levena stopped abruptly in her tracks.

An ogre was standing there.

She froze, unsure whether to scream or turn and run.

The ogre, on the other hand, simply blinked his large eyes at her.

Levena decided to do nothing since the ogre had yet to make a move.

After a brief pause, the ogre broke into an awkward smile and greeted her.

“Ah, hello?”

“.....”

Levena’s expression grew even more serious.

An ogre that could speak?

She had never heard of such a thing.

And on closer inspection, the ogre was holding a bouquet of flowers.
Did the brutish creature rip out the flowers growing by the lakeside?
That didn't seem quite right.

Still, what were flowers to a monster like this?

A massive, fearsome ogre pulling up flowers seemed almost comical.

"Ah, these flowers," the ogre explained, blushing slightly. "They were in a bad spot, so I was moving them. Someone might step on them while walking by, and that would be a shame."

His bashful explanation left Levena even more baffled.

So, he was worried about the flowers being trampled?

That was something even Levena, a saintess, hadn't considered.

Should she feel ashamed?

But more importantly... what was this ogre?

Mustering her courage, Levena finally spoke.

"Wh-Who are you...?"

"Oh! I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Jakalis," the ogre replied.

"Jakalis?"

"Yes. I hold the title of Dragon Lord, though that doesn't matter much."

"D-Dragon? Lord?"

Levena's face turned pale.

She was friends with Lakia, who was a dragon, but that didn't mean she wasn't afraid of dragons.

Dragons, after all, were a species capable of turning an empire's capital to ash in a single day.

It was impossible to treat such beings casually.

Levena still trembled whenever she faced Elyseon.

And now, this ogre before her wasn't just a dragon—he was a Dragon Lord.

The king of dragons.

“A-Ah, yes, hello, D-Dragon Lord!” Levena stammered, bowing hastily like a broken doll.

Jakalis waved a hand dismissively.

“No need to call me that. Just Jakalis is fine.”

He smiled as he approached Levena.

“And you are? A friend of Lakia's, perhaps?”

“Ah, yes, I'm Levena. I'm a saintess,” she replied nervously.

“Levena, is it? Nice to meet you. You look just as lovely as a saintess should.”

Jakalis offered his hand for a handshake, his expression soft—or at least, it was soft by his standards. To Levena, it looked more like a menacing grin from a fearsome ogre.

“Ah, yes, n-nice to meet you....”

Before she knew it, Levena found herself shaking hands with the strange ogre.

His hand was so large it almost swallowed hers completely.

If he applied even the slightest bit of pressure, her hand would surely be crushed to dust.

“Hmm, Lakia went into the forest for a bit... Oh, there she is,” Jakalis said, gesturing.

Levena turned her head to see Lakia approaching, carrying Ash in her arms.

“Levena~”

Lakia waved enthusiastically, and Levena finally felt herself relax, a small smile appearing on her face.

“Jakalis feels... different,” Lakia said.

Jakalis had disappeared, claiming he wanted to explore the forest. Meanwhile, Lakia and Levena sat by the lakeside, their feet dipped in the water.

“Different? He seems like a nice person. It was surprising to see him in ogre form, though.”

“Well, he’s always been a good person, but he used to be darker... more sensitive. Lionel and I used to be too scared to talk to him. That’s why I never went adventuring in the south. But now...”

Lakia gazed into the distance for a moment before speaking again.

“Something feels off.”

“Off?” Levena repeated, startled.

Lakia nodded briefly.

“He keeps smiling all the time, and his overly soft attitude is weird. He smiles like everything he sees is beautiful. It makes me want to punch him, though I can’t, of course....”

“I see....”

Levena could somewhat relate.

There were people in the cathedral who saw the world as nothing but beautiful, too.

It wasn’t a bad thing, but sometimes, it was irritating enough to make her want to shout, “What are you smiling about?!”

Like during the recent discussions about the Demon King’s invasion.

One person had said, “A war? That’s impossible. The world is peaceful. And if the Demon King’s army comes, we can work things out peacefully through dialogue....”

Naturally, the senior bishop, Javier, had hit that person with a cloth-

wrapped mace.

It would have been better if it weren't cloth-wrapped.

"Oh, right."

Levena suddenly remembered something and pulled out a piece of paper.

"Look at this, Lakia."

"What is it?"

"These are the candidates for the hero's party. It hasn't been officially formed yet, but these are likely the members."

Lakia hummed as she took the paper.

The paper showed illustrations of the candidates along with their names and descriptions.

At the top was Hero Sion.

"Oh, that brat. He's the cocky kid who pulled the Hero's Sword at Goldcastle."

"Huh? You know Sir Sion?"

"Of course. He was behind me when he pulled the sword. Before that, Ariel and I saved him and his scruffy little sister from getting beaten up in an alley."

"Wow, that's amazing. You and Ariel saved Sir Sion?"

"Yeah, and after pulling the sword, he was so full of himself...."

Lakia glared at Sion's illustration with resentment.

"The next time I see him, I'm going to punch him."

"....."

Levena fell silent, unsure how to respond.

Chapter 118: Hero Party

Once again, Levana began her day by pretending to head toward the sanctuary for prayer but instead used a portal to travel to the Evergreen Forest.

Lately, she spent far more time in the forest than at the Grand Cathedral.

She would arrive early in the morning and only return late at night. The clergy assumed she was devoutly carrying out her sacred duties, though some worried about her health. In truth, Levana was simply enjoying leisurely days in the serene forest.

She busied herself making clothes for the wolf pup Ash, wandering the forest trails, or splashing around in the lake.

With Ariel and Lu off on their adventure, her only conversational partner was Lakia.

Lakia, too, spent her time alone at the lakeside, aside from the wolves.

Her brother, Lionel, had left for the Dwarven Mountains, and her mother, Elision, had moved deep into the forest with her guardian, Gaizen, seeking uninterrupted privacy.

Even Ghost and Black, after having Ash, had grown even closer.

Ash was left in Lakia's care near the lake, while Ghost and Black ventured deep into the forest and rarely showed themselves. Levana mused that Ash might soon have siblings if things kept up.

The lakeside was typically peaceful, but today...
Something was different.

An ogre stood there.

Levana froze, unsure whether to scream or run.

The ogre, meanwhile, blinked its enormous eyes and looked back at her.

Since it wasn't attacking, Levana hesitated.
Then the ogre smiled awkwardly and greeted her.

"Ah, hello."

"..."

Levana's expression turned grim.
An ogre... talking?

She had never heard of such a thing.

And then there were the flowers.

The ogre was holding a bouquet. Had it plucked them all from the lakeside?

The sight of the massive creature delicately holding flowers was both baffling and oddly amusing.

"Ah, these flowers," the ogre began, its cheeks flushing. "Their spot was awkward, you see. Someone might step on them. I thought it'd be better to move them somewhere safer."

Levana stared, utterly bewildered.
So... the ogre had moved the flowers out of concern for them?

Even as a saint, Levana had never considered such a thing.

Should she feel ashamed?

Or more importantly, *who was this ogre?*

Gathering her courage, she asked, "W-Who are you?"

"Ah! I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Jakalis."

"Jakalis?"

"Yes. I hold the title of Dragon Lord, but that's not particularly important."

“D-Dragon? L-Lord?”

Levana’s face went pale.

While she had become friends with Lakia, that didn’t mean dragons didn’t terrify her.

Dragons, after all, were capable of leveling an entire empire’s capital in a single day.

Even now, Levana still trembled in Elision’s presence.

And this ogre wasn’t just a dragon but a Dragon Lord—a king among dragons.

“G-greetings, Dragon Lord!”

Levana’s stiff, mechanical bow was accompanied by a nervous squeak.

Jakalis, however, waved his hand dismissively.

“No need to call me that. Just call me Jakalis.”

Jakalis smiled and extended his hand, but Levana hesitated. To her, his expression resembled more of a savage ogre’s grin than a friendly smile.

“Y-yes... nice to meet you...”

And so, Levana found herself shaking hands with a dragon in an ogre’s form.

His hand was so large that it practically engulfed hers, and she couldn’t help but imagine the horrifying possibility of him accidentally crushing it.

“Hmm, Lakia seems to have gone into the forest. Ah, there she is now.”

Jakalis gestured, and Levana followed his gaze to see Lakia emerging from the woods, Ash in her arms.

“Levana!”

Lakia waved enthusiastically.

Levana felt a wave of relief wash over her and returned a small smile.

Later, Jakalis disappeared into the forest to explore, leaving Lakia and Levana at the lakeside, their feet dipped in the cool water.

“Jakalis seems... different,” Lakia remarked.

“Different? He seemed nice enough. His ogre form caught me off guard, though.”

“Well, yeah, he’s always been nice, but before, he was... darker. More serious. Lionel and I used to be too scared to talk to him. That’s why I didn’t join Lionel’s southern expedition.”

Lakia’s gaze drifted as if recalling something unpleasant.

“But now... he’s always smiling, like he finds everything beautiful. It’s... annoying. Makes me want to punch him. Not that I could.”

Levana chuckled nervously.
She understood the sentiment.

At the Grand Cathedral, there were always those who viewed the world through rose-colored lenses. While it wasn’t inherently wrong, their relentless optimism could be irritating.

When the impending war with the Demon King’s forces had been discussed, someone had suggested, “Surely we can resolve this peacefully through dialogue,” only to be met with a swift thwack from Archbishop Javier’s cloth-wrapped mace.

Levana had silently wished it hadn’t been wrapped in cloth.

“Oh, right!”

Levana pulled a sheet of paper from her robes.

“Look at this, Lakia.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a roster of Hero Party candidates. The party hasn’t officially formed yet, but this is likely what it’ll look like.”

Lakia took the paper and scanned it.

At the top was Sion, the Hero.

“Ah, that brat. The cocky kid who pulled the Hero’s Sword from Goldcastle.”

“You know him?”

“Of course. Elision and I rescued him once. Back then, he was just a scrappy kid getting beat up in an alley with his sister.”

“Wow, so Ariel and you saved Sion?”

“Yes. But then he pulled that sword and got all high and mighty... I ought to smack him next time I see him.”

Levana fell silent, unsure how to respond.

Sion was now a national figure, perhaps even more revered than the royal family given the impending war.

Yet Lakia spoke as though she could still casually hit him.

And knowing Lakia, she probably could.

“What about this one? The mage?”

Below Sion’s portrait was Sena, a bubbly-looking young girl with an impish smile.

“Yes, that’s Sena. She’s the Tower’s Chief Mage. She’s young but exceptionally skilled, so she’s likely to join the Hero Party.”

“Hmm.”

Lakia’s expression was one of mild disdain.

Levana understood. No matter how skilled a mage was, they were

powerless compared to a dragon.

“Ooh, an elf.”

The third portrait depicted Liana, the elven warrior.

“Yes, that’s Liana, a master archer and expert in close combat. She currently leads the elite elven guard but is expected to join the Hero Party for the war.”

“So, it’s Sion, Sena, Liana... and you?”

“Yes.”

Levana looked nervous.

“I’m not sure if I’ll get along with them. What if I mess up...?”

Lakia grabbed Levana’s cheeks and stretched them.

“What’s there to worry about? You’ve got me and Ariel. If any of them bother you, I’ll turn them to ashes.”

“Don’t say that! They’re my allies!”

Levana batted Lakia’s hands away, her face red from both embarrassment and the tugging.

“Well, if anyone does cross the line...”

Levana’s gaze grew cold.

“I suppose a little punishment wouldn’t hurt.”

Lakia grinned wickedly.

“Leave it to me.”

Chapter 119: Asgard (1)

“Ooh, Sister, it’s the Giant Tribe’s ruins!”

Lu shouted in excitement.

Ariel, having crossed the Siland River on Theodoras’s back, had finally arrived at the ancient ruins of the Giant Tribe.

Ariel silently surveyed her surroundings.

Towering stone structures stood amidst the dense forest, their surfaces weathered by time, with patches of moss growing here and there.

Despite their aged appearance, the ruins remained majestic.

Ariel stepped inside.

The sound of the wind echoed eerily through the silence.

Not long after, she reached the center of the ruins, where a massive fountain stood.

Though dried up now, it must have once sent powerful streams of water cascading forth.

“Wow! This is amazing!”

Lu zipped around excitedly, flying to and fro, while Ariel and Theodoras slowly approached the fountain.

In front of the fountain stood a large statue.

“This one looks like you,” Ariel said, pointing to the statue as she spoke to Theodoras.

The statue was in the shape of a turtle and bore an uncanny resemblance to Theodoras.

Theodoras blinked and studied the statue closely.

For a moment, it felt like he was looking into a mirror, and Ariel couldn't help but chuckle at the sight.

Just then—

“Kuwwooooar!”

A ferocious roar erupted from behind them.

Turning around, they saw a massive shadow standing at the entrance to the ruins.

A figure three times the size of a human—no, it wasn't a giant.

It was a monster resembling a gorilla.

Its red eyes burned with rage.

Bulging muscles adorned its thick limbs.

Its body was covered in black fur.

“Kuwwooooar!”

The monster roared again and charged toward them with terrifying speed.

Theodoras stepped forward to shield Ariel, lowering his body slightly as if preparing to defend.

His shell looked incredibly sturdy.

The monster, now in front of Theodoras, raised its enormous fist high into the air.

Just as it was about to bring its fist down—

Crack.

The monster's neck twisted in the opposite direction.

“.....”

Silence fell over the ruins.

The monster collapsed with its fist still raised, hitting the ground with a thunderous **thud**, causing the earth to tremble slightly.

Theodoras stared at the fallen monster in shock.

He reached out and gave the body a small shake, but it didn't move.

It was dead.

Killed by Ariel's magic.

Even after crossing the river, Theodoras had witnessed such scenes several times.

But he still couldn't get used to it.

How could magic so effortlessly snap an opponent's neck?

Even his sturdy shell would be useless against such power.

He wouldn't even have the chance to hide before his neck would snap.

Ariel walked over to the monster's body and stretched out her hand.

The monster's corpse disappeared without a trace.

It was a sight Theodoras had seen many times before.

She must have been storing the corpses in some kind of magical space.

Theodoras asked, “What are you going to do with the monster's body?”

Ariel glanced at Theodoras and replied, “Sell it. On the black market.”

“The black market?”

“Yes.”

“Can you sell monster corpses there?”

“Yes. The rarer the monster, the higher the demand. Originally, you too...”

Ariel stopped mid-sentence.

Theodoras’s face turned pale.

“W-What do you mean by ‘originally me too’? What were you going to say next?”

“Nothing.”

Ariel awkwardly averted her gaze.

“You were definitely about to say, ‘Originally you too,’” Theodoras pressed.

At that moment, Lu called out from a distance.

“Sis! I’ve found it!”

Seizing the opportunity, Ariel began walking toward Lu, and Theodoras crawled after her.

Lu stood by a wall slightly away from the center of the ruins.

The wall bore a painting that matched the descriptions in Eras’s *History of the Giants*.

“Hmm, seeing it in person makes it even clearer. This is definitely a cipher. ‘Only those who seek the truth shall open the gate to Asgard.’”

Lu fluttered his wings as he looked at Ariel.

“We need to find the truth.”

“.....”

Ariel narrowed her eyes and scrutinized the painting as if trying to uncover the truth hidden within it.

Then, Theodoras murmured from the side, “The ground is moving.”

Both Ariel and Lu turned their gaze toward him, their expressions freezing.

The ground where Theodoras was pressing with his foot was shifting slightly, as if something was hidden beneath it.

Ariel cast a telekinesis spell to lift the ground, and Lu flew closer.

“Wow! There’s something here!”

Lu scattered flying powder over the object, lifting it into the air.

It was a massive book, crudely titled *Record* on its cover.

Ariel approached the book, and Lu quickly opened its pages.

...Once, we thrived, but over time, our bodies grew frail.

The cause was the levels of oxygen and gravity.

The air grew thinner, and the gravity bore down on us.

This land was not a suitable environment for us to live.

At this rate, we would face extinction.

But there was hope.

Asgard.

They say it is a place where we can breathe freely and live in peace.

We decided to leave and conceal the path to Asgard.

Other races might covet Asgard and invade it.

I agreed with the decision, but I also felt a sense of loss.

It pained me to leave behind the lifeforms and beautiful nature

of this land.

So, I left a small hope behind.

For someone who might one day desperately seek us, I left a clue to the path to Asgard.

Have you seen the turtle statue by the central fountain?

I modeled it after a cute turtle I encountered by the river.

If you move the statue, you'll find a magic circle etched into the ground.

When the moon is fully revealed, the circle will begin to glow, and a dimensional gate to Asgard will form.

I ask one thing of you.

Once the gate forms, please return the turtle statue to its original position.

That way, the path to Asgard will remain hidden.

Also, please ensure the statue isn't damaged.

I put great care into making it.

As I leave this record, I dream of a new beginning in Asgard.

And I hope that one day, you who read this will visit Asgard.

"See... I knew it."

Lu's eyes glistened with tears.

"The Giant Tribe isn't extinct... Sister, this is incredible... I can't believe we found something like this...."

Beside him, Theodoras was also on the verge of tears.

Though he said nothing, Ariel suspected that the "cute turtle I

encountered” mentioned in the record was none other than Theodoras.

After all, the statue bore an unmistakable resemblance to him.

Ariel looked up at the sky.

The sun had set, and darkness was creeping in.

The record had stated: *“When the moon is fully revealed, the circle will begin to glow, and a dimensional gate to Asgard will form.”*

A full moon—tonight was the night.

Ariel walked to the central fountain and carefully moved the turtle statue aside.

Sure enough, an ancient magic circle was revealed beneath it.

“Ahh!”

Lu exclaimed in awe, while Theodoras leaned down to sniff at the circle.

Since the moon wasn’t fully risen yet, they decided to wait for a while.

Sitting by the fountain, each of them lost themselves in their thoughts.

Lu was brimming with anticipation at the thought of meeting the Giant Tribe, while Theodoras was reminiscing about old friends.

Ariel, meanwhile, began to nod off, overcome by drowsiness.

Some time later—

“Sister....”

Lu shook Ariel awake.

“The moon is up....”

Ariel groggily opened her eyes and looked at the sky.

The full moon hung high above, its radiant light bathing the ruins in a soft glow.

“This magic circle... it’s glowing, but something seems off....”

Lu sounded uncertain.

Ariel turned her gaze back to the circle.

Light was emanating from it, but, as Lu said, something seemed wrong.

The glow flickered, as if trying to activate but resetting before it could fully form the dimensional gate.

“I’ve been watching it for a while... it keeps doing this. Sister, maybe this magic circle is too old to function properly...? Maybe it’s so old it can’t create the gate anymore....”

Lu looked at Ariel with teary eyes.

Beside him, Theodoras anxiously tapped at the circle with his foot.

But nothing changed.

To Ariel, the circle indeed seemed ancient and unable to function properly.

“No... no, this can’t be... Sister, we finally found it....”

Lu stomped his feet in frustration, while Theodoras continued tapping at the circle.

Maybe....

With that thought, Ariel approached the circle.

She gently pushed aside Lu, who was sobbing, and Theodoras, who was growing more desperate, and placed her hand on the circle.

The circle was old, no doubt about it.

But what if the issue wasn't with its functionality, but simply a lack of mana?

Could it be fixed by supplying mana?

Ariel drew upon her mana and began pouring it into the circle.

Tsszzzzt!

The circle started glowing faintly at first, then quickly grew brighter until it radiated a blinding light.

Lu and Theodoras watched in awe as Ariel continued pouring mana into it.

The circle emitted a powerful glow, as if on the verge of exploding, and then—

Pop!

With a sound like a bursting bubble, the glow scattered outward.

“S-Sister....”

Lu pointed behind Ariel, his voice trembling.

“It's here... the dimensional gate....”

Chapter 120: Asgard (2)

Late at night, Grak was patrolling the large fence, ensuring everything was secure.

The lantern in his hand cast light into the dark corners of the structure.

“Hm, everything looks fine today as well,” Grak thought, nodding in satisfaction.

It was an uneventful task, as nothing had ever gone wrong with the fence since the Giants had come to Asgard.

The fence enclosed the area where the dimensional gate would form, though it had never activated.

This was thanks to Torga, the last Giant to enter Asgard, who had hidden the magic circle that created the dimensional gate.

Despite this, Grak inspected the fence daily.

It was his duty to ensure no one else entered Asgard.

Grak had even given himself the title “Watcher of the Dimension,” though no one called him that.

To the Giants, he was simply Grak—or sometimes “Fence Grak.”

The fence was made of thick wooden posts bound tightly by the Giants’ strength, leaving no gaps.

Even the top of the fence was secure.

Unless someone stronger than a Giant or capable of powerful magic came along, no one could escape the enclosure.

Satisfied with the state of the fence, Grak began heading back to his cabin.

At that moment—

Zzzzzzt!

A faint vibration rippled through the air, followed by a sudden burst of blue light within the enclosure.

“!”

A dimensional gate had formed.

Grak gripped his stone axe and cautiously approached the glowing portal, his sharp eyes scanning for movement.

Someone had found the hidden magic circle.
But who?

Moments later, something emerged from the gate.
Grak braced himself, lowering his stance.

Crawl...

“.....?”

To his surprise, what appeared was a slow-moving turtle.
And atop the turtle’s shell sat a girl.

The girl’s pointed ears revealed her to be an Elf.
“Wow, is this Asgard? It feels like we’re surrounded by trees!” she exclaimed.

A small glimmering figure flew out of her hat—it was a Fairy.

Grak’s grip on his axe wavered.
The turtle, the Elf, and the Fairy approached the fence, with the Elf girl looking directly at Grak.
“Look, it’s a Giant! Sister, it’s really a Giant!”

The Fairy buzzed excitedly around Grak’s face.
“Hello, Mr. Giant! So Giants still exist after all! That’s such a relief—uh, are you okay?”

The Fairy waved her tiny hand in front of Grak’s face.
But Grak remained frozen, staring at the Elf girl.

Sensing his gaze, the Elf tilted her head curiously.
That innocent motion, combined with the shimmer of her silver hair, overwhelmed Grak.

His stone axe slipped from his hand as he clutched his chest, his heart

racing.

If it beat any faster, it felt like it would explode.

“Are you okay, Mr. Giant?” the Fairy asked again, but Grak didn’t respond.

He had only one thought:

“She’s so cute...”

It’s a little-known fact that Giants are utterly mesmerized by Elves. The beauty of an Elf, which charms all races, affects Giants especially strongly.

Their imposing, powerful forms contrast sharply with the delicate, ethereal allure of Elves.

Grak’s face turned red as sweat dripped from his hands.

When the Elf girl tilted her head again, her cascading silver hair sparkled under the moonlight.

The sight struck Grak like a bolt of lightning.

“.....”

He collapsed unconscious with a heavy thud.

“What’s wrong with this guy?” Lu muttered, looking at the fallen Grak.

They had finally met a Giant, only for him to faint on the spot.

“Is he sick?”

Pop!

Ariel and Theodoras appeared next to Lu, having teleported past the fence.

Ariel could have easily torn the fence apart, but teleportation was less destructive.

Sliding off Theodoras’s shell, Ariel examined Grak closely.

He was enormous—his nose, mouth, and ears were all oversized.

She cast a healing spell, but it had no effect.

Grak seemed uninjured and stable, suggesting he had fainted from shock at seeing them.

After all, the dimensional gate hadn't opened in ages.

"Sister, there's a cabin over there. Should we move him inside?" Lu pointed to a large hut in the distance.

Ariel nodded and lifted Grak with telekinesis.

Despite his massive size, it was effortless for her, given she had once lifted the Kraken.

They soon reached the cabin, which matched Grak's size—towering with thick wooden pillars and a sturdy wooden roof.

Inside, Ariel found a bed large enough for Grak and gently laid him on it, covering him with a thick blanket.

Lu wanted to explore the cabin, but it felt improper to snoop around while Grak was unconscious.

Instead, they stepped outside and waited near a stone table and chairs by the entrance.

"This place is amazing! Everything's so big!" Lu exclaimed, perched on Ariel's shoulder.

Ariel nodded. Everything here was oversized—trees, leaves, and even the rocks scattered across the ground were massive.

It was a world made for Giants.

Ariel reached out to stroke Theodoras, who had been quiet.

"Theodoras, is there a specific Giant you're hoping to meet?"

"....."

Theodoras hesitated before speaking.

"There's someone I'd like to see. But it's been so long... he's likely no longer alive."

Giants lived longer than humans but had far shorter lifespans compared to Theodoras.

He explained, his voice trembling, "I met him when I was young. I don't know how much time has passed since, but I doubt he's still

here. Still, I... I want to find any trace of him.”

Ariel hugged Theodoras gently.

“We’ll help you find him,” she whispered.

“His legacy must still exist somewhere,” Lu added.

Theodoras nodded, tears welling in his amber eyes.

As they embraced, the cabin door creaked open.

“Ugh... What happened...”

Grak, the Giant, staggered out, his steps unsteady as he emerged from the cabin.

Chapter 121: Asgard (3)

Grak led Ariel to his cabin to determine exactly why she had crossed into Asgard via the dimensional gate.

This was his duty, and if Ariel had entered Asgard with bad intentions, Grak couldn't let it slide—even if she was as adorable, charming, and lovable as she seemed.

As *The Watcher of Dimensions*, it was his responsibility to protect Asgard, though most of the Giant Tribe didn't call him that. Recently, Grak had been considering other titles like *The Noble Guardian* or *The Last Sentinel*.

Clearing his throat, Grak addressed Ariel, who sat on his bed alongside Theodoras and Lu.

For a moment, Grak's thoughts wandered: *An elf... sitting on my bed... how adorable!* But he shook off the distraction. This wasn't the time to let his mind drift; he had a job to do.

"May I ask why you came to Asgard?" Grak's usually deep and booming voice sounded unexpectedly soft and high-pitched.

"That would be...!" Lu exclaimed from Ariel's shoulder, launching into an explanation. He eagerly recounted how they deciphered Eras's *History of Giants*, found the record in the ruins, and used the magic circle to activate the dimensional gate.

While Lu spoke, Grak barely listened. His attention was fixed on Ariel's face, stealing glances whenever possible.

"So, that's how you got here. Then how did you leave the enclosure? I didn't open the gate," Grak asked.

"That would be...!" Lu explained how Ariel had used teleportation magic to bypass the enclosure.

Grak nodded. “Ah, teleportation magic. Makes sense. I’ve heard that elves are highly attuned to mana and excel at magic. So, you didn’t come here with any ill intentions?”

“No,” Lu replied, while Ariel gave a small nod, and Theodoras blinked once.

“Then welcome to Asgard,” Grak said, visibly relaxing. “That record you found must have been written by Torga, the last Giant to cross into Asgard. He loved the old world and often made turtle statues that looked just like that one over there.”

“Oh, so the Giant’s name was Torga!” Lu exclaimed, glancing at Theodoras.

“Was Torga your friend? We’ve already found one clue!”

Hearing this, Theodoras softly murmured, “Torga,” with a faint smile.

Turning back to Grak, Lu asked, “Now, Giant sir, may we ask you some questions?”

“Questions? Sure! But first, let me get something to drink. My throat’s a bit dry,” Grak said, lumbering off to the kitchen.

Grak returned with a pitcher of juice made from forest fruits.

“Hmm... All I’ve got are giant-sized cups,” he muttered sheepishly, scratching his head. The oversized cups in Grak’s cabin were clearly unsuitable for Ariel, Lu, or Theodoras.

Ariel waved her hand, and three new cups appeared on the table—each perfectly sized for them: one small for Lu, one medium for Ariel, and one slightly larger and more robust for Theodoras.

“Wow, is that magic? Amazing!” Grak marveled at the ice cups, which seemed sturdy and wouldn’t melt easily.

“Could you make one for me, too? I’d love to try drinking from one of those,” Grak asked hopefully.

Ariel waved her hand again, and a massive ice cup appeared, just the

right size for Grak.

“Amazing!” Grak exclaimed as he poured juice into his ice cup. It kept the juice wonderfully cool, enhancing its flavor.

“Wow, this is incredible! I always thought magic was just for destruction, but it can be used for stuff like this too!”

After admiring the cup, Grak hesitated. “But... it’s ice, so it’ll melt eventually, right?”

In response, Ariel floated up using levitation magic and placed her hand on the cup. The ice glowed faintly blue for a moment.

“There,” she said. “I’ve inscribed a magic circle. The cup will never melt.”

“...It’ll stay frozen forever?” Grak asked, astonished. Ariel nodded.

Grak stared at the cup in awe, both deeply moved by Ariel’s gesture and entranced by her close-up beauty.

She’s so... unbelievably cute...

Feeling his heart race and his cheeks flush, Grak quickly refocused as Lu fluttered toward him.

“Alright, Giant sir, can we ask our questions now?”

Grak nodded. “Of course. Ask me anything.”

Lu grinned and pulled out a small note—a list of questions he had prepared in advance.

“First, is it true that the Giants came to Asgard because of oxygen levels and gravity, as the record suggested?”

“Yes,” Grak replied. “The old world became uninhabitable. The air thinned, and the gravity crushed us. Our numbers dwindled until there were only about a hundred of us left. Then, a god who cared for our kind created Asgard as a sanctuary.”

“So Asgard is a world created by a god! Fascinating!” Lu scribbled

furiously on his note. “Did all the remaining Giants cross into Asgard?”

“Yes.”

“And what was Asgard like when the Giants first arrived? Was it like this—everything so large?”

“Exactly. It was a perfect world for us—vast forests, massive lakes, enormous trees, and plenty of wildlife. But no intelligent beings or monsters.”

Listening to this, Ariel thought of Elysion’s Evergreen Forest, which was similarly unspoiled by civilization or dangerous creatures.

Grak continued, “We haven’t explored all of Asgard yet—it’s too vast. And we’re still in the process of settling in.”

“Still settling in? Does that mean the Giants haven’t established a full civilization yet?”

“Not quite. Our population is still under 150, and we’ve only built two villages: one in the east and one in the west. Initially, the two villages cooperated, but now relations are strained. There’s even occasional conflict.”

Grak sighed. “It’ll take more time, but eventually, we’ll establish a proper civilization. I believe that one day, Asgard will have a thriving kingdom.”

Ariel tilted her head, sensing something odd.

“Grak, how long have the Giants been in Asgard?”

Grak drank from his icy cup before answering. “Hmm... about ten years, I’d say.”

“Ten years?!” Lu’s eyes widened in shock.

“But that’s impossible! The Giants disappeared from the continent ages ago—centuries, even millennia! Their traces are nearly forgotten. How can it have been only ten years?”

“What?” Grak frowned.

“We’ve only been in Asgard for ten years.”

Chapter 122: Asgard (4)

A heavy silence settled over the group.

Lu blinked, his face a mix of shock and confusion, while Ariel appeared deep in thought.

The Giants had vanished from the continent roughly a thousand years ago, their existence reduced to faint historical memory.

Yet, according to Grak, the Giants had only crossed into Asgard ten years ago.

This could only mean one thing:

Time flows differently between the two worlds.

“H-How is this possible? Am I face-to-face with an ancient being right now...?”

Lu asked, his voice quivering as he stared at Grak in disbelief.

“C-Could you tell me about anything that happened before the Giants came to Asgard? Anything at all?”

Grak furrowed his brow, as if searching his memory.

“Well, let’s see... Oh, right. There was a huge uproar because of an evil god. What was its name? Naxxis? Yeah, that sounds about right. It was incredibly powerful but ended up sealed away by an elven hero.”

Lu’s face turned pale.

If it was the evil god Naxxis, then yes, it had been sealed by an elven hero in the distant past.

Although Naxis had recently reawakened and been subdued once more, the original sealing had occurred in ancient times.

“That happened not long before I crossed into Asgard.”

For Grak, an event from over a millennium ago was remembered as taking place a mere decade prior.

Lu turned to Ariel, his expression desperate.

“L-Lady Ariel... What is going on here?”

Ariel, however, seemed to have worked through her thoughts.

Given that they had crossed dimensions, it made sense that the flow of time might differ.

The real issue was the time disparity upon returning to the original world.

If ten years in Asgard equated to a thousand years in the original world, then one day in Asgard would be equivalent to a hundred days back home.

Since they had already spent two hours in Asgard, more than a week must have passed in their world.

If Ariel stayed here too long, everyone she knew might grow old in her absence.

She imagined Lakia as an adult, Levena as a grandmother, and Ash as a wolf too large to be called a cub anymore...

Though the thought of Lakia grown up was oddly appealing, Ariel preferred Levena as she was now.

And she wanted to witness Ash grow at a natural pace.

Ariel turned to Grak.

“Where’s the dimensional portal that leads back to the original world?”

“It’s in the same fenced area where you arrived. Right now, it’s hidden by a boulder, but if you move it...”

Before Grak could finish, Ariel grabbed Lu and Theodoras and teleported instantly.

There was no time to waste. Time was now a hundred times more precious.

With a flash, Ariel reappeared inside the fenced area.

The dimensional portal was closed.

This was because Ariel had covered the magical circle with the turtle statue before crossing into Asgard.

She first tried to teleport directly to Evergreen Forest to test whether dimensional travel was restricted.

“...No luck.”

As expected, teleportation magic only worked within the same dimension.

Ariel calmly acknowledged this limitation and turned her focus to reopening the dimensional portal.

She spotted the large boulder Grak mentioned and used telekinesis to move it aside, revealing the dormant magical circle beneath.

The magical circle was inactive, likely due to a lack of mana after lying unused for so long and without the presence of a full moon.

Ariel pressed her hand to the circle and began channeling her own mana into it.

Zzzzzt!

The circle flickered to life and soon glowed brightly. Whoosh! The dimensional portal formed once again.

Without hesitation, Ariel stepped through the portal, taking Lu and Theodoras with her.

An odd sensation coursed through their bodies as the scenery shifted. Ariel found herself back at the Giant ruins where they had first opened the portal.

She looked around.

The sun was shining brightly in the afternoon sky.

Yet when they had left for Asgard, a full moon had hung in the night sky, and only two hours had passed.

The ground was also damp, as though it had been raining for days.

Ariel realized with certainty:

The two hours they spent in Asgard had translated into over a week in their original world.

Normally, Ariel would have abandoned the Asgard expedition at this point.

Even a short adventure in Asgard could result in losing weeks—possibly years—back in their world.

But there was one thing she needed to confirm.

“Lu, Theodoras, wait here for me.”
“Huh? Lady Ariel, where are you going?”

Without answering, Ariel stepped back into the dimensional portal. Night once again greeted her as she returned to Asgard. Ariel stood still, counting the seconds.

Three minutes passed.
Then she stepped back through the portal into her original world.

“L-Lady Ariel...?”
Lu and Theodoras stared at her, puzzled.

Ariel turned to Lu.
“How long was I gone?”
“Not long... About three minutes?”

At that, a small smile appeared on Ariel’s lips.
Her theory was correct.

The distortion in time only occurred when the dimensional portal was closed.
As long as the portal remained open, time would flow normally in both worlds.
By leaving the portal active, Ariel could explore Asgard without worrying about the disparity in time.
When she explained this to Lu, he sighed in relief.

“Thank goodness, Lady Ariel. I was worried we’d have to cut this adventure short. We’ve only met one Giant so far—ending it here would’ve been too sad.”

Ariel nodded and inspected the magical circle.
To keep the dimensional portal open, she needed to enhance the magical circle to sustain itself indefinitely.
She also cast a powerful barrier around the area to prevent any unauthorized beings from crossing into Asgard.
This task was incredibly complex, enough to exhaust even a dragon, but for Ariel, it was manageable.

Once the enhancements were complete, Ariel returned to Asgard with Lu and Theodoras.

She repeated the same process there—enhancing the magical circle and casting a protective barrier.

Finally, satisfied with her work, Ariel smiled.

The portal would now remain open, allowing her to explore Asgard freely without disrupting the flow of time.

Flash!

When Ariel returned to Grak's hut, he blinked in confusion.

“Where did you all go?”

Lu eagerly explained the discovery of the time discrepancy and Ariel's solution.

Though Grak had somewhat expected this after their earlier conversation, he still looked faintly dazed.

“So... while we spent ten years in Asgard, a thousand years passed in your world? That's unsettling...”

Lu reassured him with a grin.

“Don't worry! Lady Ariel has stabilized the portal, so it won't happen again.”

Lu then pulled out his trusty notebook and resumed questioning Grak about the Giants.

Grak happily answered every question.

When Lu was finished, he smiled.

“Thank you, Mr. Giant! I'm planning to write a book about the Giants, and I'll make sure to include your name.”

“Oh, that sounds great!” Grak chuckled, finishing his drink. Then Ariel spoke up.

“That Giant who crossed into Asgard last... are they still alive?”

Theodoras perked up, his attention focused entirely on Grak.

Grak nodded immediately.

“Torga? Oh, he’s alive and well. I saw him just yesterday.”

With that, Ariel, Lu, and Theodoras set out for Torga’s hut.

Unlike most Giants, who lived in villages, Torga preferred solitude, residing deep in the forest.

When they reached the location Grak had described, they saw a small hut with its lights off.

Outside, a Giant sat on a tree stump, gazing at the starry sky.

It had to be Torga.

Torga’s expression was contemplative, lost in thought.

Ariel turned to ask Theodoras if this was his friend, but there was no need.

Tears streamed down Theodoras’ face as he stared at Torga. His lips trembled, and his golden eyes glistened with emotion.

Ariel and Lu silently waited.

After a moment, Theodoras whispered,
“I-I’ve seen enough....”

Then, turning around, he began to crawl away.

Ariel and Lu followed, puzzled.

“Theodoras, aren’t you going to talk to him?” Lu asked.

Theodoras silently shook his head.

“Why not? You’ve been wanting to see him so badly!”

“I... I do. But... I just can’t....”

It had been a thousand years.

For all those years, Theodoras had cherished the memory of Torga.

The longing and anticipation had built up so much that, now, he couldn't summon the courage to face his old friend.

"Theodoras."

Ariel gently grabbed his tail.

"If you don't speak to him now, you might regret it later."

At that moment, a voice came from behind.

"Excuse me...."

A rustling sound accompanied the approach of a familiar figure.

"T-Theodoras... is that you?"

It was Torga, his eyes trembling as he stared at his old friend.

Chapter 123: Asgard (5)

“You... you’re that turtle from the Siland River, aren’t you?”
Torga slowly approached Theodoras.

“You seem like it, though you’ve grown so much since then....”

Theodoras simply stared at Torga, his face frozen in place. Tears streamed endlessly down his wide eyes.

Moments later, Theodoras finally spoke.

“Yes... it’s me. I came here to find you....”

“I knew it!”

Torga ran forward and embraced Theodoras.

“I knew it was you!”

Tears began flowing from Torga’s eyes as well.

“Damn it, you have no idea how much I’ve missed you! I thought about you every single day since I left! I couldn’t help it back then, but it still tore me apart!”

Theodoras began trembling before breaking into sobs.

“I... I missed you too, every single day... not a single day passed without thinking of you...!”

“Ugh... and you came all the way here? Crossing dimensions just to find me...!”

Torga gently stroked Theodoras’s shell with his massive hands.

Theodoras cried out in anguish, “I missed you so much...!”

“I missed you too!”

As the two clung to each other, Lu sniffled and wiped his eyes.

“I’m so glad for them....”

“Me too.”

Ariel offered a small, warm smile.

A reunion after a thousand years. True friendship, it seemed, could transcend time and dimensions alike.

“Sister....”

Out of nowhere, Lu latched onto Ariel’s neck in a tight hug.

“You must never leave me behind, Sister... If that ever happens, I’ll wait for you—whether it takes a thousand years or ten thousand years...!”

“.....”

For a moment, Ariel considered how long a fairy’s lifespan might be. She wasn’t sure, but ten thousand years seemed highly improbable. Still, she refrained from mentioning that thought aloud and simply stroked Lu’s back gently.

That night, they decided to stay at Torga’s cabin and planned to visit the giant villages the next morning.

Torga and Theodoras stayed up late talking, exchanging stories about how they had lived their lives until now.

When Torga learned that time in Asgard moved differently from the original world, he broke down crying again.

“So... so you waited a thousand years for me...?”

Torga hugged Theodoras tightly.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking clearly back then. The air was thinning, the gravity was crushing us, and we had to hurry to Asgard. I didn’t even know what Asgard was like, so I couldn’t risk bringing you along. I’m so sorry for making you wait so long.”

“It’s fine. What matters is that we’ve reunited now.”

Theodoras’s tail wagged from side to side in delight.

As it turned out, Theodoras was quite affectionate. He nestled himself into Torga's arms, refusing to let go, his crescent-shaped eyes filled with contentment.

Seeing this, Ariel felt a twinge of jealousy toward Torga but quickly dismissed it.

After all, if Theodoras tried to cuddle Ariel like that, she would undoubtedly end up squashed beneath his weight.

Perhaps she could find a turtle plushie of an appropriate size...

With that thought, Ariel hugged her dragon plushie, Sparky, and drifted to sleep.

The next morning, after a simple breakfast at Torga's cabin, the group set off for the giant village.

They walked along a sunlit forest path. Torga and Theodoras played a riddle game, while Ariel strolled a bit further back with Lu, taking in the massive scenery.

Everything in the giants' world was enormous.

While the nighttime forest had felt mysterious and somewhat eerie, the morning light transformed it into something awe-inspiring.

Trees stretched so high they seemed to touch the sky.

Leaves were broad enough to completely cover Ariel's body.

Even the flowers by the roadside and the butterflies flitting around them were massive.

"...We're always drinking it to survive. You can't see it, but it's everywhere. Without it, many living things can't survive. They'd suffocate."

Ahead of her, Theodoras was giving Torga a riddle.

Ariel recognized the riddle immediately—it was one she had given Theodoras before.

Torga answered confidently, "Hmm, the answer must be air?"

"...Wrong."

But Theodoras's competitive spirit was undeterred.

"The answer... is water."

"What? How does that work?"

Theodoras began explaining slowly.

"We're always drinking water to live... and when I said you can't see

it, that was a metaphor. Water is transparent, it doesn't have a fixed shape. So even though we see it, it's not really 'visible'...."

"Ah, I see. But what about the part where you suffocate without it? Isn't it the opposite? If you're submerged in water, you can't breathe."

"Well...."

Theodoras's eyes darted around as he tried to think of an explanation.

"If there's no water, nothing else can exist... so in the end, we suffocate because of that...."

"Ah-ha!"

Torga nodded as if he'd just learned something profound.

"As expected of someone who's lived a thousand years—you've grown incredibly wise. I could never beat you. You're amazing, Theodoras."

"...You flatter me."

Theodoras held his head high, a satisfied smile on his face.

"I've spent all this time honing my skills."

"Clearly. I can't believe I didn't think of water as the answer."

Watching the two, Lu clicked his tongue quietly.

"...Do you think Torga actually believes Theodoras's nonsense? Is he serious?"

"....."

Ariel shrugged.

The correct answer to the riddle was, of course, air.

She knew because it was the same answer she had given when she posed the riddle to Theodoras before.

"He's probably just humoring him," Ariel replied softly.

If Torga truly believed Theodoras's explanation, Ariel might have to reevaluate her opinion of the giants' intelligence.

"Haha, you're too clever, Theodoras!"

"...You're too kind."

Regardless, their riddle game continued, with Theodoras achieving a flawless victory.

The giant village wasn't far from Torga's cabin.

The giants had only been in Asgard for ten years, and their population was just over a hundred, so they lived relatively close to each other to provide mutual support.

However, the village was divided into two parts.

The eastern village and the western village, separated by a towering cliff.

According to Torga, the leaders of the two villages, Grok and Brom, were brothers.

“Grok, the elder brother, governs the eastern village, while Brom, the younger, leads the western village. They got along well in the first few years. The villages traded frequently and held joint festivals. But as time passed, conflicts began to arise.”

The root of the conflict was suspicion.

The eastern village believed the western village was monopolizing better hunting grounds, while the western village suspected the eastern village of hiding valuable herbs.

Each side accused the other of selfishly hoarding resources.

The tensions grew, and now the two villages didn't share resources or celebrate festivals together anymore.

“It's a shame. We still need to support each other. Plus, the two leaders are brothers! Before coming to Asgard, they were so close, but now they're worse than strangers.”

Torga's voice was heavy with regret.

“Well, I understand why. They're responsible for their people's safety in an unfamiliar world, so it's natural to be cautious. But I wish they could trust each other more.”

Soon, the two villages came into view.

“Wow, is that...!”

Lu flitted upward, his wings beating excitedly.

The giant villages looked like something out of a magical landscape painting.

The enormous cliff loomed high into the sky, with the villages nestled on either side.

At the top of the cliff, sparse trees and vines grew, while streams of water trickled down, forming small waterfalls.

“Which village should we visit first?”

At Torga's question, Ariel hesitated.

Meeting the village leaders seemed like the obvious next step.

Grak, the “Fence Guardian,” had suggested the same thing, saying the leaders would inevitably hear about visitors anyway, so they might as well meet them directly.

However, there was a problem.

If they visited one village first, the other might take offense.

In the worst-case scenario, this could even spark a conflict.
Ariel explained her concerns to Torga, who nodded in agreement.
“You’re right. Visiting one side first could cause trouble....”

From a distance, the two villages looked similar.

Rows of large log houses stood neatly arranged, with a spacious clearing at the center of each village.

The clearings had massive fire pits, likely used for festivals.

“...Hmm?”

Movement caught their attention in the western village.

Giants were gathering in the central clearing, arming themselves, and then marching with a grim determination.

“Are they heading out to hunt or something...?”

Torga murmured, but it didn’t seem like hunting.

The western village giants were moving toward the eastern village.

And they were armed.

Chapter 124: Asgard (6)

Ariel and her companions hurried toward the eastern village.

The atmosphere was unusual, to say the least.

It was as if war could break out at any moment.

When they arrived at the eastern village shortly after, a dispute was already underway.

“Hey, Grok! Hand over the herbs immediately! The children in our western village are sick!”

“What herbs? We don’t have any herbs!”

“That makes no sense! If you’re not hiding them, why are only the children in the eastern village healthy?”

“How should I know? Maybe you’re not taking care of your children properly in the western village!”

“What? You think we’re not trying? We’re doing everything we can!”

The two giants arguing were Grok and Brom, leaders of the respective villages.

When Torga asked a nearby giant about the situation, they explained that the children in the western village had recently fallen ill, while the children in the eastern village remained perfectly healthy. This led to accusations of hoarding herbs and an ensuing argument.

“You eastern villagers must be sneaking out to collect herbs at night. We’ve heard sounds coming from beyond the cliff!”

“What nonsense! Who gathers herbs at night? It’s more likely that your western villagers are too busy hunting in secret to care for your children!”

“When have we ever gone hunting at night?”

The leaders of the two villages were grabbing each other’s collars and

shouting, while other giants stood around, gripping weapons and glaring at the opposing side.

“If you won’t hand over the herbs, we have no choice! We’ll beat you all down and take the herbs ourselves!”

“Hah! Try it if you can! After we crush you, we’ll claim the meat you’ve hidden in your western village. Come at us!”

Just as the fight was about to erupt.

“Stop this immediately!”

Torga shouted.

“Huh?”

“What is it, Torga? Why are you interfering? You live in the forest hut—this doesn’t concern you.”

“If you’re not part of a village, stay out of it.”

Both leaders and the other giants turned to look at Torga.

Facing them, Torga spoke firmly.

“This is not the time for fighting. There are visitors in Asgard.”

“What? Visitors?”

All eyes turned to Ariel, Lu, and Theodor standing behind Torga.

“Oh, oh wow, it’s true!”

“Is that... an elf?!”

“So cute...!”

The giants’ expressions softened as they looked at Ariel.

Placing their hands over their hearts, they gushed, calling her adorable and lovable while wriggling in delight.

“.....”

The tense atmosphere dissipated, but Ariel couldn’t shake an uncomfortable feeling.

“Um, could I possibly take a look at the sick children?”

Lu fluttered up and asked.

“I’m a fairy, so I can create healing powder. And my sister here can cast holy magic. If you trust us, we might be able to cure them.”

For now, the quarrel was paused, and Ariel’s group headed to the western village.

The children there were suffering from high fevers, with purple spots visible on their tongues and in their mouths.

After examining the children, Lu nodded knowingly.

“Hmm, I think I know what’s causing this.”

She then went outside to the village path and plucked a purple flower.

In the giants’ world, the flower was enormous.

Without Lu’s flying powder, it would have been too heavy to carry.

“The children are sick because of this flower.”

“What? What kind of flower is that?”

Brom, the leader of the western village, tilted his head in confusion.

“It just looks like a pretty flower.”

But Lu shook her head.

“This flower is called Lunaria. It glows faintly under moonlight, making it incredibly beautiful and alluring. But you must beware of it when it glows. That’s when it releases a deadly toxin.”

Lu’s expression darkened.

“Lunaria is known among fairies as a highly dangerous poisonous plant. If it isn’t removed, the children won’t survive.”

“D-damn it, I had no idea. I thought it was just a pretty flower.”

Brom quickly ordered the other giants to remove all Lunaria growing in the village.

Meanwhile, Ariel cast holy magic to heal the children.

When sacred light poured from Ariel's hands and enveloped the children, they began to recover one by one.

The fever that had tormented them vanished, and the purple spots disappeared.

The children's health was fully restored.

"Oh...!"

"What a relief...!"

The giants from both the western and eastern villages rejoiced, and the conflict was resolved—for now.

"Oh, we can't let this go unnoticed!"

The giants decided to hold a festival for their visitors, preparing food in the village square.

While they set up, Ariel explored the village, followed closely by the children who had recovered.

One child shyly approached her.

"Um, could I... could I touch you for a moment?"

"....."

Even though they were children, they were still giants.

From Ariel's perspective, they were enormous.

But there was no real reason to refuse.

Ariel nodded, and the children cautiously came closer, gently patting her head or lightly touching her cheeks.

Their touch was so delicate, as if afraid she might break.

“You’re so pretty. I want to keep you at my house.”

“What are you saying? She’s not a pet—she’s an elf.”

“So what? I’d take good care of her.”

Meanwhile, Lu was chatting with the elder giants.

As she had with Grak, she asked various questions, seemingly gathering information for a book.

“Want to play a riddle game?”

Theodor approached a child and suggested a game.

The innocent child happily agreed but soon burst into tears and ran to their parents.

Everyone was enjoying a peaceful time.

However...

“Look at this! Your village has so much meat. You must’ve been hoarding hunting grounds!”

“No, that’s from the bear meat we shared last time. You took some too.”

“You’re saying you still haven’t eaten it? You’ve been holding nightly feasts, haven’t you?”

“When did we ever hold feasts? We just lit fires and chatted a little.”

The giants of both villages began squabbling again.

As Ariel watched the scene quietly, someone approached her.

“Ah, they’re at it again.”

It was Grak, the “Fence Keeper.”

“If the villages don’t unite, a serious fight will break out someday. They keep doubting each other....”

At Grak’s words, Ariel turned her gaze to the cliff that divided the villages.

Ariel spoke.

“There’s a way to fix this.”

“Huh? A way to fix it? What is it?”

“If the cliff disappears, wouldn’t that solve the problem?”

“Well, yeah. If the cliff were gone, there’d be no reason to doubt each other. They could see each other’s villages clearly.”

Grak took a sip of ale from the ice cup Ariel had made for him.

“But we can’t remove such a massive cliff. Unless a giant much larger than us comes to break it....”

Ariel suddenly stood up.

Then, she walked toward the cliff.

“I’ll remove it.”

“What...?”

Grak followed her, stunned.

“Y-you’re going to remove that cliff?”

“Yeah.”

“But... no, it’s impossible. Even with magic, that cliff is....”

Ariel stretched out her hand, and Grak fell silent.

The massive cliff began to tremble faintly.

At the same time, the ground shook as if an earthquake had struck.

“W-what...?”

The giants stopped fighting and turned to look at the cliff.

Ariel poured a vast amount of mana into telekinesis, causing her silver hair to billow wildly.

Boom!

The cliff began to rise slowly, like a massive floating island in the sky.

It defied gravity, lifting higher and higher, leaving the giants gaping in astonishment.

“Unbelievable... this is impossible....”

Someone muttered, but for Ariel, nothing was impossible.

The cliff floated gently away and was set down on a wide plain near the village.

“.....”

Silence fell over the area.

No one spoke, their eyes fixed on Ariel.

Her hair, which had been flying wildly, now lay still, and her expression remained calm.

Turning her gaze, Ariel looked at the place where the cliff had once stood.

It was now open, with the other village clearly visible.

Chapter 125: Asgard (7)

“.....”

The giants fell silent.

The massive cliff that had divided the villages was gone in an instant.

The overwhelming sight left them breathless, unsure how to process the situation.

For a long time, the cliff had caused frustration.

It had blocked their view, making it impossible to know what was happening in the neighboring village.

This led to distrust and misunderstandings, with some wondering whether merging the villages might be better.

But merging meant one side would have to relocate, enduring inconvenience and loss. Both sides had thought, *Merging is fine, but you should move to our village*. And so, the issue was left unresolved.

Now, such concerns were unnecessary.

With the cliff gone, the villages were effectively one.

Relief washed over the giants as they slowly smiled.

And then...

“Wow, look! Water!”

The children rushed toward the spot where the cliff had been.

“Water is flowing from the ground!”

The giants approached as well.

“Oh...”

Sure enough, water was gushing from where the cliff once stood.

It seemed the removal of the cliff had exposed an underground spring.

Even before, a trickle of water had seeped through cracks in the rocks.

Now, the flow increased, forming a pool.

The children gleefully splashed and played in it.

“This could become a shared village water source.”

If they dug and shaped the area, it could be turned into a pond or a small lake.

They wouldn’t need to travel to a distant lake for water anymore, and the village landscape would become more beautiful.

Grok and Brom, the leaders of the two villages, exchanged glances.

The distrust and wariness in their eyes were gone, replaced by a spark of hope for a new future.

The festival in the giants’ village continued late into the night.

The absence of the cliff seemed to make the atmosphere even livelier.

They lit a bonfire and gathered around, singing songs.

The songs were likely traditional giant folk songs, but to Ariel, they sounded more like noise.

Occasionally, a particularly enthusiastic giant would leap up and dance. The dances, to be honest, were bizarre—so much so that even Lionel’s strange dance back at the magical hot springs seemed more graceful in comparison.

Still, none of that mattered.

Everyone was enjoying themselves.

On the long wooden banquet tables, fresh fruits, vegetables, roasted bear meat, bread, and cheese were laid out. Everything was so large that Ariel had to nibble delicately at her portions.

“Look at her, even the way she eats is adorable.”

“Mom, let me keep the elf! I’ll take good care of her!”

Watching Ariel eat, the giants’ expressions softened, and some even stomped their feet in delight.

“Look at her tiny mouth nibbling like that! She’s so lovable!”

“Her hair sparkles like moonlight.”

Overwhelmed by their stares, Ariel felt like she might choke. She put down her food and stood up.

Instead, she pulled out desserts from her inventory and began distributing them to the children.

Even though they were children, they were giants, so she had to hand out large portions.

Her inventory was quickly depleted.

It seemed she’d need to stock up on desserts in bulk the next time she visited the imperial capital, Delight.

“Wow, this is delicious!”

“Do elves eat sweet things like this to look so beautiful?”

Though her inventory was empty, Ariel felt satisfied watching the children enjoy the treats.

She decided to give gifts to the adults as well.

Since her inventory only had monster corpses and gold coins left, she opted to make ice cups, like the one she had given to Grak.

The cups would ensure everyone could enjoy chilled drinks.

Creating over a hundred ice cups might seem daunting, but for Ariel, it was no trouble.

With a single motion, rows of ice cups formed, and a simple touch perfected them.

“Oh! Are these really made of ice? And they don’t melt?”

“How did you make this? It’s amazing!”

“Imagine how refreshing ale will taste in this!”

The giants eagerly filled their cups with juice and ale, their reactions ecstatic.

“Wow! This is incredible—such cool ale!”

“This cup is a treasure for our household!”

The cheering giants brought a smile to Ariel’s face.

Grok and Brom soon dashed home and returned with gifts for Ariel.

“We can’t let such an amazing elf leave empty-handed after all she’s done for us!”

“Exactly, especially one so adorable!”

Grok’s gift was the first.

It was a pair of golden rings.

“These are the Rings of Eternal Love.”

Intricate patterns adorned the rings’ surfaces, and when placed together, they formed a complete design.

Though Ariel couldn’t decipher the symbol, Grok explained that it represented “eternal love.”

“They’re meant to be exchanged between lovers.”

The glittering gold rings were magical, like Lu’s Blink Ring, and resized themselves to fit the wearer’s fingers.

“When worn by a pair in love, the rings allow them to sense each other’s location, no matter how far apart they are.”

Ariel bowed deeply in gratitude.

The golden rings seemed perfect for sharing with Lakia. They sparkled like sunlight, and the ability to locate each other would be a valuable gift.

Lakia would likely be thrilled.

Perhaps even bouncing with joy.

Imagining this, Ariel smiled softly and turned to Brom’s gift.

“.....”

Ariel paused.

Brom’s gift was... a 2-meter-tall muscular man.

Not a living man, of course.

It was a model.

The upper body was bare, while the lower body was barely covered with a straw skirt. Despite this, the model wore a confident smirk.

Its disheveled hair gave it a primitive vibe.

“This is...”

Brom’s eyes sparkled as he explained the model.

It was essentially a figure modeled after the giants’ god, Urkanos.

In other words, this bare-chested, primitive-looking man represented their deity.

“This model is made of Titanium, so it’s indestructible. It’s heavy, but that just adds to its value. Lightweight models are always inferior.”

Brom demonstrated by moving Urkanos’s arms and legs, showcasing

its articulation.

“You can pose it any way you like. Come closer and take a look.”

Reluctantly, Ariel approached the 2-meter-tall figure, craning her neck to look up.

It felt... unsettling.

The figure was eerily lifelike, with its Titanium surface painted to resemble real skin. Even the veins in the muscles were intricately detailed.

It didn't look like a model at all—it seemed like a frozen person.

Ariel's gaze traveled down to the straw skirt covering the lower half.

Was the inside as detailed as the outside...?

As if reading her thoughts, Brom beamed proudly.

“The skirt is the most detailed part—completely realistic.”
“!”

That decided it. Ariel wasn't keen on keeping this gift.

Still, Brom continued explaining enthusiastically, ignoring her discomfort.

He handed Urkanos a club and a round shield.

“Ta-da! These replicate the actual weapons Urkanos wielded. The club could shatter mountains, and the shield could block any attack. Even though these are just models, they're made of Titanium and incredibly durable.”

Standing tall with the dark club and shield, Urkanos looked as smug as ever—perhaps even arrogant.

“.....”

After a moment of staring, Ariel nodded slowly.

Despite the unsettling details, it might prove useful.

With her telekinesis, she could animate it like a puppet, posing it as if it were alive.

Of course, its expression would remain frozen.

Smiling faintly, Ariel patted Urkanos's muscular leg.

"Well, I'll count on you, Urkanos."

Both gifts from Grok and Brom were, in their own way, satisfying.

Friends

Morning dawned in the giant village.

By the spot where Ariel had removed the cliff, a large pool of water had formed overnight.

The giants immediately grabbed picks and shovels to begin digging.

They aimed to transform it into a lake or pond for the village's water supply.

Ariel considered helping with magic but decided against it.

The giants were laughing and working together, and this project seemed to be bringing them closer.

With the cliff gone, the two villages already felt like one.

They shared meals, discussed future plans, and displayed a spirit of cooperation.

Ariel created a magical artifact to help them.

It was a statue of Theodoras, crafted by Torga, with a purification magic circle engraved on its shell.

Placed in the lake, it would purify the water, making it safe to drink.

“Oh...”

The giants were moved once again.

Purifying the lake would have been a laborious task, but with this statue, it was solved instantly.

They expressed their gratitude to Ariel, who began preparing to leave.

Though she hadn't explored all of Asgard, most of it was untamed wilderness better left to the giants to develop.

“Waaah, don't go!”

“Live here with us!”

The children clung to Ariel, crying.

“We'll take good care of you.”

“We'll build you a nice home and find you food.”

“.....”

Ariel floated gently upward with telekinesis and patted their heads.

“I'll visit again.”

She intended to leave the dimensional gate open, ensuring time flowed the same in both worlds.

“You promise you'll come back?”

“Bring more desserts next time!”

“I will.”

At the mention of desserts, the children quickly stopped crying.

After patting them one last time, Ariel approached Theodoras.

Theodoras chose to stay in Asgard.

Although Ariel had hoped to bring Theodoras to Evergreen Forest, he had Torga—a friend he had waited a thousand years to reunite with.

Ariel couldn't replace that.

Still, Theodoras shed tears at their farewell.

“A-Ariel...”

He pressed his head against her face.

“Thank you... because of you, I found Torga and had so many wonderful experiences....”

“Theodoras.”

Ariel gently stroked Theodoras’s neck.

“I had a great time too.”

As a parting gesture, she gave him a riddle.

“What is something precious, unforgettable even across the flow of time or dimensions? Something that brings joy when you’re together?”

“.....”

Theodoras’s amber eyes widened, tears streaming continuously.

“Take a guess, Theodoras.”

Theodoras had never solved any of Ariel’s riddles before.

Would he succeed this time?

“There’s no hint,” Ariel added firmly.

After a moment of deep thought, Theodoras opened his mouth.

“The answer is...”

Ariel and Lu returned to the lake in the Evergreen Forest.

The lakeshore was eerily quiet.

Nearby lay the torn head of a rabbit doll and the tattered lower half of Naxis’s body, but no one else was in sight.

Not Lakia, not Levena, not even the wolves.

It seemed everyone was away.

“Sister, do you think Theodoras will be alright staying in Asgard? He’s supposed to be the guardian spirit of the Silland River....”

Ariel shrugged.

She wasn’t sure, but it should be fine.

Theodoras hadn’t done much at the Silland River anyway.

Mostly he’d wandered along the riverbanks, nibbling on grass, or challenged passersby to riddles.

Besides, Ariel had already defeated the river’s biggest threat, the Kraken.

The river would manage without him.

“At least he solved the last riddle,” Lu mused.

He had answered it perfectly, bursting into tears afterward. Ariel had to pat his shell for a long time to calm him, but still, he had solved it without any hints.

Quite impressive.

Ariel smiled.

It hadn’t been long since they parted, but she already missed the enormous turtle.

“Ahhh!”

A voice called out from the forest.

“Ariel!”

Turning, Ariel saw Lakia running toward her, wearing the body of a rabbit doll and holding a baby bear in her arms.

“Ariel!”

Lakia’s bright smile lit up as she ran closer, followed by Ash, the gray wolf, dashing from the trees.

Ariel opened her arms, only to be toppled over by Lakia and Ash.

It was just like when Ghost and Black had bowled her over before.

“I missed you, Ariel! You were gone so long this time! You’ll tell us all about your adventure, won’t you?”

Lakia nuzzled Ariel’s face, while Ash licked her forehead.

Beside them...

The baby bear Lakia had tossed aside sat awkwardly, looking lost.

Lu asked, “Lakia, who’s the bear?”

“Oh, that’s Sam. He’s Ash’s subordinate.”

“Subordinate?”

The baby bear whimpered softly, clearly uncomfortable.

Squirming in place, he seemed eager to escape to the forest but remained frozen under Lakia and Ash’s watchful eyes.

“He keeps following Ash around. He must like her. Sam’s a boy, after all.”

“.....”

Ariel glanced at Sam.

The bear looked utterly exasperated, waving his paws as if to say,
That’s not true!

Rising, Ariel said gently, “Sam, you can go back to the forest.”

Sam hesitated, glanced nervously at Lakia and Ash, then bolted into the woods.

It seemed he endured a lot of torment from Ash.

“Lakia, I brought you a gift.”

Ariel pulled the golden rings from her inventory and handed one to Lakia.

One was for Ariel, and the other for Lakia.

“These are the Rings of Eternal Love....”

As Ariel explained their function, Lakia’s face turned bright red.

“A ring for... someone you love?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Th-that means... Ariel, you love me...?”

“Yes.”

“!”

Lakia froze, eyes wide.

Scenes flashed rapidly in her mind.

She imagined walking through the forest hand-in-hand with Ariel.

Sitting side-by-side on a rock to rest, bathed in sunlight with a gentle breeze rustling the leaves.

Flowers blooming around them, birds singing above.

Ariel lifting her hand to touch Lakia’s cheek.

Lakia shyly lowering her gaze.

Then Ariel whispering her love, their faces drawing closer...

“Kyaaaah!”

Lakia began bouncing up and down.

“I-I’m not ready! But if you want, I...!”

Watching this, Lu clicked his tongue quietly.

In his opinion, Ariel’s notion of love was far more inclusive.

For example...

“Sister, do you love me too?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You love Ash too, don’t you?”

“That’s right.”

Exactly like that.

Meanwhile, Lakia rolled on the ground, lost in her own world of delight.

“Th-there? No, but maybe...!”

Lu shook his head, certain her thoughts were far from wholesome.

After a moment, Ariel looked around and asked, “Where’s Levena?”

Lakia stopped rolling and sat up.

“Oh, Levena hasn’t been able to visit the forest lately. She’s joined a Hero Party.”

“A Hero Party?”

“Yes, they’re preparing for war. The Demon King’s army is gathering in the north.”

What Levena had feared was finally happening.

The Demon King’s army was preparing for war.

Not yet, but soon.

Reports indicated they were assembling to attack the northern regions of the empire.

The north was the empire’s strongest military region.

If it fell, the empire would be in grave danger.

The Hero Party had been formed sooner than expected to confront the Demon King’s army.

Hero Zion, Mage Sena, Elf Warrior Liana, and Saintess Levena.

Having exchanged only brief greetings, they traveled in awkward silence.

As if to worsen the mood, rain began to pour.

Levena felt miserable.

Not only was the atmosphere tense, but now she was soaked to the bone.

Ssshhhhh!

The rain showed no sign of stopping, pouring relentlessly as though the heavens had opened.

“Um, should we take a break? This rain is too much,” Zion suggested, halting.

Though the situation in the north was urgent, they couldn’t see ahead through the downpour.

If they got lost, it would delay them further.

“Resting might be a good idea,” Levena said with an uneasy smile.

Everyone found a spot to shelter from the rain.

Levena sat beneath a large tree.

Though the ground was damp, it didn’t matter—her robes were already soaked.

I hope the rain stops soon, she thought.

Looking ahead, she noticed Liana standing in the rain, staring at the mountain ridge.

“Is something wrong?” Levena asked, rising.

At that moment, a loud rumble echoed in the distance.

Boom!

Liana turned to Levena, her face urgent.

“We need to... take cover....”

She couldn't finish her sentence.

A massive flood surged toward them.

Chapter 126: Friend

Morning dawned on the village of the giants.

In the place where Ariel had removed the great cliff the day before, a large pond had formed overnight.

The giants wasted no time, gathering picks and shovels to begin working on it.

Though its final size was uncertain, they intended to turn it into a lake or reservoir to serve as the village's water source.

Ariel considered using magic to help, but decided against it.

Seeing the giants from both villages laughing and working together, she realized her interference wasn't necessary. This shared task would strengthen their bonds.

With the cliff gone, the two villages already felt like one.

They shared meals, discussed plans for the future, and worked harmoniously side by side.

Ariel crafted a magical item to help them—a statue of Theodoras, sculpted by Torga at the village entrance.

On the statue's shell, Ariel inscribed a purification spell.

When placed in the lake, it would purify the water, making it safe to drink.

“Ohhh...”

Once again, the giants were awestruck.

Even with the lake, water purification would have been necessary for

it to serve as a proper reservoir. But thanks to the statue, that effort was now unnecessary—a simple solution to a potentially complex task.

The giants expressed their gratitude repeatedly, and Ariel began preparing to leave.

Although she hadn't explored all of Asgard, she decided to leave its vast wilderness for the giants to discover and shape.

“Waaah, no! Don't go!”

“Live here with us!”

The children clung to Ariel, their eyes brimming with tears.

“We'll take good care of you!”

“That's right! We'll build you a house and bring you food!”

Ariel floated into the air with telekinesis, gently patting their heads.

“I'll visit again someday.”

She planned to leave the dimensional gate open so time would flow the same between their worlds, allowing her to return whenever she wished.

“Really? Promise you'll come back!”

“Bring more desserts next time!”

“Yay!”

At the mention of desserts, the children's tears dried up quickly, their faces lighting with joy. Ariel patted them one last time before heading to Theodoras.

Theodoras had decided to stay in Asgard.

Though Ariel wanted to bring him back to the Evergreen Forest, Theodoras had Torga—a friend he had waited a thousand years to reunite with.

Ariel couldn't replace that bond.

Still, Theodoras wept as he bid her farewell, his tears falling freely.

"A-Ariel..."

Theodoras approached slowly, pressing his head against her in a gesture of affection.

"Thank you... Thanks to you, I reunited with Torga and had such wonderful experiences...."

"Theodoras."

Ariel gently stroked his neck.

"I had a great time too."

She decided to leave him with a final riddle.

"Even across dimensions, no matter how much time passes, this is something you never forget. Something precious. Something that brings joy when you're together. What is it?"

Theodoras' amber eyes widened as tears poured from them.

"Take a guess, Theodoras."

For the first time, Theodoras answered correctly:

"A friend."

—

Returning to the Evergreen Forest's lake, Ariel and Lu were greeted by a peculiar scene.

The lakeshore was eerily quiet, littered only with the torn head of a rabbit costume and the tattered lower half of Naxisus.

Neither Lakia, Levana, nor the wolves were in sight.

"They must've stepped out for a while," Lu remarked.

“But, sis, is it really okay for Theodoras to stay in Asgard? He is the guardian spirit of the Siland River, after all....”

Ariel shrugged.

She figured it would be fine. Theodoras’ primary activities back in the river had been leisurely grazing on riverbank grass or challenging passersby to riddles.

Besides, Ariel had already vanquished the river’s greatest threat—the Kraken.

“I guess he’ll be okay,” Lu murmured. “Still... he finally solved your riddle in the end, huh?”

Lu’s voice carried a mix of amusement and admiration.

Theodoras’ tearful reaction to answering correctly had moved Ariel as well, though she wouldn’t admit it outright.

“I kind of miss that big turtle already,” Ariel thought, a soft smile on her lips.

“Ahhh!”

A voice rang from the forest.

“Lady Ariel!”

It was Lakia.

Wearing the body of her rabbit costume and holding a baby bear in her arms, she rushed toward Ariel with a radiant smile.

Behind her, the gray wolf Ash darted ahead, barking joyfully.

Ariel opened her arms as they both collided with her, knocking her to the ground.

“*I missed you, Ariel-sama!* This time, it felt like you were gone forever! Will you tell us all about your adventure?”

Lakia nuzzled Ariel’s cheek while Ash enthusiastically licked her

forehead.

Nearby, the baby bear Lakia had tossed aside sat dazedly on the ground, looking utterly bewildered.

Lu tilted his head and asked, "Lakia, who's the bear?"

"Oh, that's Sam. Ash's subordinate."

"Subordinate?"

At that, the baby bear let out a pitiful whimper.

Sam squirmed uncomfortably, glancing longingly at the forest as if wishing to leave. But under Lakia and Ash's watchful eyes, he remained seated.

"He keeps following Ash around. I think he likes him," Lakia said.

Ariel turned to the bear.

"Sam, you can go back to the forest."

Sam hesitated, glancing between Lakia and Ash, before bolting into the woods as fast as his little legs could carry him.

"He must've been getting bullied," Lu muttered under his breath.

"Ariel-sama, I brought you something!" Lakia chirped.

Ariel handed Lakia a golden ring, one of a matching pair. She slipped one onto her finger and helped Lakia put on the other.

"This is a Golden Lovers' Ring...."

As Ariel explained its significance, Lakia's face flushed bright red.

"W-wait! You mean this is something you give to someone you love?!"

"Yes."

Lakia froze, her eyes wide as her mind filled with daydreams.

“*A-Ariel-sama loves me?*”

“Yes.”

Ariel’s simple confirmation sent Lakia spiraling into a vivid fantasy, her face glowing with delight.

Lu rolled his eyes. He knew Ariel’s love was far more inclusive.

“Do you love me too, sis?”

“Yes.”

“How about Ash?”

“Of course.”

Meanwhile, Lakia was too busy rolling on the ground, squealing with joy, to hear their exchange.

“What about Levana?” Ariel asked suddenly, scanning the area.

Lakia stopped her antics and looked up.

“Oh, Levana can’t come to the forest right now. The Hero Party’s been formed.”

“Hero Party?”

Lakia explained the situation: the Demon King’s army was gathering in the north, signaling an imminent war.

Levana, Sion, and the others had already set out to face the threat.

Little did they know, they were about to face one of the greatest challenges of their lives.

Chapter 127: The Demon King's Army (1)

The flood was caused by a landslide.

The heavy rain had loosened the ground, sending massive rocks and soil tumbling down the mountain.

The torrent of debris and water surged through the valley, gaining momentum as it went.

Centuries-old trees were uprooted, and house-sized boulders were swept along like mere pebbles.

This raging flood struck the Hero Party with full force.

An unexpected disaster.

Before they could even react, the flood swept them away, scattering them in every direction.

This calamity occurred just a day after they had set out to confront the Demon King's army.

“Ugh...”

Levena stirred and opened her eyes.

The rain had stopped, and sunlight now streamed through the canopy above.

She was in a forest.

While the rain had ceased, the leaves and rocks were still soaked, and the ground was littered with muddy puddles.

“Where is everyone...?”

There was no sign of Hero Zion, Mage Sena, or Elf Warrior Liana.

Levena tried to piece together what had happened when the flood struck.

At the moment of impact, Liana had rushed to her and grabbed her hand.

The elf had leapt onto a large tree nearby, pulling Levena with her.

But even that tree had been uprooted and carried away by the current.

Despite the chaos, Liana had refused to let go of her hand, holding on as long as she could.

“Don’t ever let go of my...”

Thud.

A boulder had struck Liana on the head, and she had slipped silently beneath the raging waters.

“L-Liana!”

Levena had tried to hold on to her, but Liana was swept away too quickly, vanishing from sight.

“Aaah!!”

A scream had echoed nearby.

It was Sena’s voice.

“S-Sil...”

Sena had seemed to be casting a spell, but her words were drowned out by the water.

Levena had felt an odd sense of solidarity with her at that moment.

She herself had been utterly incapable of using holy magic in such chaos.

Casting magic in a situation like that would take...

Ariel.

The thought of Ariel suddenly crossed her mind.

The situation was dire—should she call for Ariel's help?

But Ariel was on an adventure in the southern regions.

Would summoning her into such a mess be too much to ask?

But she's my guardian knight. If I'm in danger, she'll understand...

Levena made her decision.

She would summon Ariel.

Ariel, please help...

Thud.

Before she could finish her call, something struck her head.

A boulder had hit her.

Levena lost consciousness, and when she woke up, she was in her current situation.

“.....”

It seemed her attempt to summon Ariel had failed.

Still, the fact that she had survived felt like divine protection.

For someone who had been struck on the head, she felt surprisingly fine—no pain or visible injuries.

Levena stood, determined to figure out where she was and find the scattered members of the Hero Party.

Rustle.

Someone stepped out of the bushes.

“!”

Levena tensed, turning to face the figure.

It was a towering man, nearly 2 meters tall, with rippling muscles.

His upper body was bare, and his lower half was barely covered by a straw skirt.

Despite his primitive appearance, he wore a smug grin.

A dark club hung at his waist, and a round shield was strapped to his back.

For a moment, Levena wondered if she had somehow traveled back in time.

His appearance was so primitive that it seemed plausible.

“H-Hello?”

Levena cautiously stepped back and greeted him.

The man did not reply.

He kept his confident smile as he slowly approached her.

His broad muscles glistened in the sunlight, and the ground seemed to sink under his heavy steps.

There was something unnatural about his movements.

It was clear he wasn't normal.

“Do you... live around here?”

Levena asked, all the while preparing a holy spell in her mind.

What would be the best spell to use?

Holy magic wasn't very effective against the living.

If he blocked her attack with his shield, it would be useless.

Perhaps she should prepare a defensive spell instead?

Or should she try summoning Ariel again?

As she deliberated, the man approached until he was directly in front of her. Levena fell back in fright.

"D-Don't come any closer!"

The man, still smiling, loomed over her, his figure backlit by the sunlight.

That smile—what could it mean?

It could have a variety of interpretations.

Right now, it seemed to say: *Scream if you want. No one will hear you. You're alone in this deep forest.*

At that moment.

"Grrk!"

A goblin burst out of the bushes, stabbing a dagger into the man's stomach.

Clang!

The blade didn't penetrate.

It was as if the man's skin was made of steel, effortlessly deflecting the goblin's weapon.

"?"

Levena, and even the goblin, tilted their heads in confusion.

Whoosh.

The man pulled his club from his waist and swung it at the goblin.

Thud!

Blood splattered everywhere.

The goblin was flattened, reduced to an unrecognizable mess.

“Ugh...”

The sight made Levena squeeze her eyes shut.

“Hmm?”

When she reopened them, she realized none of the blood had touched her.

A blue barrier had formed in front of her, shielding her from the splatter.

“This is...?”

As Levena examined the barrier in surprise, she felt a gentle poke on her cheek.

“Hey there.”

A soft, familiar voice whispered.

It was Ariel’s voice—the one voice Levena trusted most in the world, the one that always brought her peace.

“.....!”

Levena turned, overwhelmed with emotion.

There stood Ariel, just as she had hoped.

“A-Ariel!”

Levena jumped up and hugged her tightly.

“You really came!”

She hadn't failed to summon Ariel after all.

If she had, Ariel wouldn't be here now.

And as she embraced Ariel, she noticed her hair was damp.

That meant Ariel had flown directly into the flood to reach her.

"I-I'm sorry! The flood swept me away, and I couldn't... I must've startled you."

"It's okay."

Ariel gently stroked Levena's head.

Though the flood had been sudden, had she not come, Levena would have been in grave danger.

Ariel had been leaving the imperial capital, Delight, after purchasing a batch of desserts when she heard Levena's call.

Levena's plea had been brief but urgent.

Ariel, please help...

The distress in her voice was unmistakable.

Ariel had immediately flown to Levena's location, only to be met with a massive flood.

The waters were sweeping away everything in their path.

Assessing the situation, Ariel had teleported to Levena, embraced her, and transported them both to safety.

The destination she chose was a familiar forest clearing—where she had once saved a merchant couple and a child trapped in a wagon.

It was also the first place she had encountered a corrupted ent.

Though rain still fell here, the area was safe from the flood.

Ariel had tended to Levena's injuries, healing the wound on her head

while she lay unconscious.

While waiting for her to wake, Ariel had passed the time by playing with Urkanos, the giant figure Brom had given her.

And now, here they were.

“.....”

After listening to Ariel's account, Levena stared at Urkanos.

“So... this is a figure? I even greeted it...”

It looked so real.

If not for its perpetually frozen smile, it could have been mistaken for a person.

“So, when the goblin's dagger hit earlier and it went *clang*, it wasn't because he was super muscular? I thought he'd just trained his body to the extreme...”

Levena cautiously touched Urkanos's body.

“It's cold and hard, yet it feels like real muscle. How did they make it so lifelike? The craftsmanship is incredible...”

Her hand brushed against Urkanos's straw skirt.

Levena froze and glanced at Ariel.

Does this mean the inside is detailed too?

Her eyes asked the question, and Ariel nodded.

“They said they put the most effort into the inside.”

“Oh...”

Levena quickly withdrew her hand, her face turning bright red.

“A-Anyway, it's a remarkable thing... It even dealt with that goblin so easily...”

She avoided looking at the goblin's remains, which had been reduced to a grotesque smear.

Ariel nodded with satisfaction.

"It's really strong."

She patted Urkanos's sturdy leg.

"I even tested it against a troll earlier. It won easily."

"R-Really? That's... amazing."

Levena smiled awkwardly.

Technically, it wasn't Urkanos that was strong—it was Ariel. But she didn't feel like pointing that out.

"By the way, I was heading to the north. The Hero Party was formed, but we got caught in the flood..."

Levena felt embarrassed recalling the moment they departed.

Crowds of citizens had lined the streets, cheering for the Hero Party.

"Good luck! Defeat the Demon King's army!"

Though the attention was overwhelming, it had felt good to be part of something meaningful.

Yet now, barely a day later, the party had been scattered by a flood.

What would the citizens say if they knew?

What would the emperor, who had encouraged them with a pat on the shoulder, think?

The thought made her cheeks burn with shame.

Levena spoke urgently.

"W-We need to find the Hero Party. Once we regroup, we have to take down the Demon King's army gathering in the north."

Ariel nodded without hesitation.

“I’ll help you.”

Chapter 128: The Demon King's Army (2)

Rustle.

Hearing footsteps ahead, Liana flattened herself against the ground.

Her movements were swift and graceful, befitting the finest warrior of the elves.

The weapon in her hand, however, was less than impressive: a stick she had just picked up.

The flood had swept away her bow, daggers, and all her gear.

Losing all her weapons to a mere flood... If the elven warriors under her command saw her now, they'd burst into laughter.

But there was nothing Liana could do about it.

Who could have anticipated such a massive flood?

In truth, losing her weapons wasn't the biggest issue.

Weapons could be replaced.

The real problem was that the Hero Party had been scattered.

To set out with such confidence to defeat the Demon King's army, only to be swept away by a flood within a day—what a humiliating turn of events.

Rustle.

The footsteps grew closer.

Liana cleared her thoughts and focused on the situation.

A seasoned elven warrior never let their mind wander when faced with a potential threat.

Moments later, someone emerged from the bushes.

“!”

Liana’s sharp eyes didn’t falter.

She saw it clearly.

“.....”

She *had* seen it.

“Oh no, Ariel, Urkanos’s skirt got caught on a branch! We need to fix this! The skirt’s completely lifted!”

A frantic voice spoke, but it barely registered in Liana’s mind.

She was frozen in place, reeling from what she had just witnessed.

“Ah, it’s fixed now. Whew, that was close. Looks like we’ll have to make Urkanos some proper clothes. If anyone saw this, they’d—oh? L-Liana?”

Ahead of her, someone recognized her.

It was Levena.

Levena was currently perched on Urkanos’s back.

Navigating the rough forest terrain had proven difficult, so Ariel had offered to carry her this way.

“Liana! You’re here! Are you okay?”

Levena’s concern snapped Liana back to reality.

She quickly assessed the situation with the sharp instincts of a trained warrior.

Standing before her was a 2-meter-tall, musclebound giant, his lips curled into a smug smile.

So he's confident, Liana thought.

Even after she had glimpsed...*that*, he still wore that smile.

Why would anyone take pride in something like that?

Sure, there might be *some* reason for confidence in that regard.

But wasn't it more important to remember that physical prowess wasn't everything? Hadn't their leader, Nameria, said so countless times?

Moreover, revealing one's private parts should evoke shame.

Yet here he stood, shamelessly grinning.

What an infuriating creature.

And to make matters worse, he had dared to abduct the Hero Party's saintess.

Liana cast a glance at Levena.

Don't worry, I'll rescue you.

Her eyes seemed to convey the message.

Levena, catching the look, responded with an awkward smile.

"Liana, are you hurt or—"

Whoosh!

Liana launched herself forward, leaping off the ground and swinging her stick at Urkanos's forehead.

Though just a branch, it was a sturdy one, carefully chosen for this moment.

It was thick and strong enough to cause some serious damage.

Crack!

The branch struck Urkanos's forehead and shattered.

Liana stared at him.

“?!”

Urkanos continued to grin confidently, entirely unaffected.

My attack... didn't work?

Though shocked, Liana quickly followed up with her next move.

She landed lightly on the ground and spun, aiming a kick at Urkanos's legs.

Thud!

“!!”

Liana's face contorted with pain.

It felt as though she had kicked solid steel rather than flesh.

She bit her lip to endure the agony, but the pain was overwhelming.

Her cheeks flushed, and tears welled in her eyes.

Limping slightly, she retreated, glaring at Urkanos.

“What... what are you? How did you train your body to this extent?”

Urkanos, of course, said nothing.

He merely continued to smile at her, that smug, infuriating grin.

“Are you mocking me? You dare—”

“No, Liana, Urkanos isn't an enemy,” Levena interrupted, waving her hands.

“Actually, Urkanos isn't even human. He's just a model! Ariel, can you explain this, please?”

Levena turned to Ariel, pleading for help.

“...Ariel?”

Levena noticed the faint amusement on Ariel’s face as she watched the scene unfold.

She’s enjoying this...

Levena could see it clearly now. Ariel, usually so stoic, was amused by people mistaking Urkanos for a real person.

Why? She had no idea.

“Ariel.”

Levena called again, and this time Ariel erased her smile, stepping forward toward Liana.

“W-Who are you?”

Liana’s eyes widened.

“You’re the elven hero... What are you doing here?”

Levena vividly remembered the first time she met Liana.

The elf had stood tall with a bow slung over her shoulder, radiating confidence.

Her lean, muscular frame and graceful curves.

Her strong yet feminine features.

She had embodied the perfect blend of warrior strength and elegance.

Levena had been awestruck.

So this is the greatest warrior of the elves. Incredible.

Liana had seemed like the epitome of a strong woman.

But now...

Munch, munch.

Liana was devouring the dessert Ariel had given her, smearing cream all over her hands and cheeks.

“P-Please eat slowly, Liana. You must’ve been really hungry. Here, have some milk too—”

Before Levena could finish, Liana snatched the milk with lightning speed.

Gulp, gulp.

She drained it in one go before stuffing more dessert into her mouth.

“Haha, you’ve got a good appetite,” Levena said awkwardly, watching her.

Liana’s clothes were tattered and filthy, though Ariel’s holy magic had healed her wounds.

Her bow was missing, and judging by her use of a stick against Urkanos, her daggers were gone too.

“.....”

Levena felt a pang of secondhand embarrassment.

Heading to the north in this state? People were bound to gossip.

What happened to them? Did they get into a fight on the way?

No, apparently, they got swept away by a flood.

A flood? That’s pathetic. Aren’t they supposed to be the Hero Party?

Exactly my point.

Levena could almost hear the whispers already.

After polishing off her dessert, Liana patted her stomach contentedly.

“Thanks, Ariel. You’re truly a hero among the elves.”

Levena furrowed her brows slightly.

Ariel had merely handed her some dessert—how did that make her a hero?

The words reached her throat, but Levena held them back.

“Liana, what about your bow and daggers?”

“Lost them, unfortunately.”

“I figured...”

“It doesn’t matter. I just need a bow. With one, I can take down the entire Demon King’s army.”

“Right...”

Levena sighed and used her sleeve to wipe the cream from Liana’s mouth.

Liana turned her gaze to Urkanos.

“That one’s impressive.”

Urkanos stood silently, holding his club and shield.

“He’s reliable, strong... and what I saw earlier was...”

“Shall we get moving?”

Levena cut her off.

She had no idea what Liana was about to say, but she didn’t want to hear it.

“We need to find the rest of the Hero Party.”

“True enough.”

They resumed their journey through the forest.

Luck was on their side—they soon found another member of the party.

“Sob... sniff...”

A young girl sat atop a tree, hugging her knees and crying miserably.

“Why is this happening to me? I’m the Mage Tower’s top genius... destined for greatness... I can’t die in a place like this....”

Noticing their approach, she hastily wiped her tears and sat up, trying to look composed.

“Oh, you’re here. You’re safe, huh? Not hurt?”

It was Mage Sena.

Beneath the tree, a horde of orcs snarled and clawed at the trunk.

The situation was obvious: she’d climbed the tree to escape them and had been crying out of fear.

“Haha, these orcs are no big deal. Once I recover my mana, I’ll take care of them. Easy. After all, I’m the Tower’s—oh no, it’s *you!*”

Sena’s eyes widened as they locked onto Ariel.

“Ariel!”

“Hi,” Ariel said with a wave.

Sena’s composure crumbled, and she burst into tears again.

“A-Ariel...! I missed you so much! Sob... I’ve been through so much...!”

Snap.

The branch Sena was sitting on broke.

“Kyaa!”

She plummeted into the orc horde below.

Ariel calmly reached out her hand.

Chapter 129: The Demon King's Army (3)

When the flood struck, Sena had tried to cast a spell.

The torrential currents made it hard to concentrate, but Sena was the Archmage of the Mage Tower, a genius who could cast spells under any circumstances.

“Shi...Shield....”

Thud.

A stray boulder struck her head, and she sank silently into the water.

When she regained consciousness, she found herself caught in a tree.

Apparently, the floodwaters had swept her into the branches.

It was a stroke of luck.

Aside from a sore head, she wasn't seriously injured.

Sena carefully cast a spell and gracefully floated to the ground.

“Phew.”

To have survived such a massive flood unscathed... Sena was quite pleased with herself.

“As expected of a genius like me... huh?”

She blinked.

Usually, she would tap the ground with her staff and laugh, but her staff was nowhere to be found.

She looked around, but it was gone.

“I... I lost it... my staff....”

For a mage to lose their staff was an enormous embarrassment.

If the Mage Tower heard about this, she'd be ridiculed mercilessly.

“Ha! What good is magical talent when you can't even keep hold of a simple staff, you idiot!”

It was almost as if she could already hear their mockery.

Still...

Please no....

Sena slowly reached up and touched her head.

Her hand brushed against cool metal.

“Ahh....”

She sighed in relief, her chest heaving.

At least her circlet was still in place.

This wasn't just any circlet but the *Mana Amplification Circlet*, a treasure she had found in a dungeon.

Wearing it tripled her mana reserves, making it an invaluable magical artifact.

Even though Sena rarely relied on magical items, the circlet was an exception.

With it, she could cast high-tier spells far beyond her normal capabilities, allowing her to grow as a mage at an extraordinary pace.

In truth, her skills had improved dramatically since acquiring it.

“I was already talented enough... but this? Almost feels unfair, doesn't it?” Sena mused, smirking.

Still...

Where was the rest of the Hero Party?

“Sure, I managed to survive thanks to my superior magical skills, but what about them...?”

She resolved to find them.

“Shriek.”

But before she could take a few steps, Sena froze.

Orcs were closing in from all sides.

Their numbers were significant, and more were coming from behind.

“Ha! Talk about bad luck—for you.”

Sena wasn’t intimidated.

No matter how many there were, they were still just orcs.

“Do you really think you can do anything to me? Stupid orcs.”

“Shriek!”

Though they couldn’t understand her words, the orcs clearly recognized her mocking tone.

That alone was enough to infuriate them.

“Shriek!”

The orcs charged at Sena.

Her lips curled into a confident smile.

“Flame Strike!”

Fire whirled around her, gathering in an instant before exploding outward.

BOOM!

The charging orcs were engulfed in flames and sent flying, while the surrounding forest turned into an inferno.

The intense heat, the acrid smell of burning flesh, and the anguished screams of the orcs filled the air.

Without pausing, Sena cast her next spell.

“Chain Lightning!”

A bolt of electricity arced from her hands, striking an orc dead-on.

Crackle!

The orc convulsed violently as the lightning leapt from one orc to another like a living serpent, electrocuting them all.

“Shriek!”

More orcs emerged from behind, rushing her.

“I knew you’d try that.”

Unfazed, Sena cast another spell.

“Wind Burst!”

A blast of wind erupted around her, sending the orcs flying like leaves.

Sena’s onslaught continued.

“Ice Spear!”

Spell after spell shook the forest, leaving a trail of defeated orcs in her wake.

Minutes later, Sena stood amidst the carnage, smirking as she surveyed her handiwork.

“Ha! That was nothing.”

Though she had exhausted a significant amount of mana, it seemed she had eliminated all the orcs.

“Shriek.”

“What? There are more?”

Sena prepared to cast again but froze as dozens of orcs emerged from the forest.

Her face went pale.

“Uh... that’s a lot.”

The new group was easily twice the size of the last.

“Maybe if I take a little break first... no, they won’t wait, will they?”

“Shriek!”

The orcs charged, undeterred by the fate of their comrades.

That was the nature of orcs—monsters who feared nothing, not even death.

“Wait, stop!”

Sena turned and ran, using the last remnants of her mana to scramble up a tall tree.

“Just you wait! Once my mana recovers, I’ll take care of all of you!”

Safe for the moment, she shouted down at the orcs.

“Do you even know who I am? I’m the Archmage of the—”

Thunk.

Something fell from her head.

Her *Mana Amplification Circlet*.

“Oh... no....”

Her face turned ghostly white.

Of all times for it to fall....

This was a disaster.

With her staff gone, her mana spent, and now her circlet on the ground, she had nothing left.

To make matters worse, her mana wouldn't recover for hours without the circlet.

And the orcs weren't going to wait that long.

"Shriek, shriek."

An orc picked up the circlet and placed it on its head.

"No! That's mine!"

The sight was absurd, but the orc seemed pleased, chuckling as it began hacking at the tree with its axe.

Thud.

Other orcs joined in, and it was clear the tree wouldn't hold for long.

When it fell, so would Sena, and then....

"Sniff... sniffle...."

She curled into a ball, hugging her knees as tears streamed down her face.

"Why is this happening to me? I'm the Archmage... a genius... I can't die in a place like this...."

Suddenly, she felt someone watching her.

Looking up, she saw a group standing nearby.

It was her party.

Levena and Liana stared up at her from the base of the tree.

Sena hastily wiped her tears and sat up straighter, forcing a nonchalant expression.

“Oh, it’s you guys. You’re okay, huh? Not hurt?”

No one needed to know she’d been crying out of fear. That would be humiliating.

“Haha, don’t worry about these orcs. Once my mana recovers, I’ll deal with them. It’s no big—oh, wait. Ariel?”

Her eyes widened as she spotted a familiar figure.

“It’s you! Ariel!”

“Hi,” Ariel said, waving.

Sena burst into tears again.

“A-Ariel! I missed you so much! Sob... I’ve been through so much...!”

Snap.

The branch she was sitting on broke.

“Kyaaa!”

As Sena plummeted toward the horde of orcs, Ariel calmly extended a hand.

Sena stopped midair, suspended by telekinesis.

“Huh?”

Sena blinked.

“This... this is telekinesis! The one I taught you! You’ve been practicing! Good job, Ariel! Come here and let me hug you!”

Still floating, Sena spread her arms as Ariel gently brought her down.

Once on the ground, she threw her arms around Ariel.

“Ah, my adorable apprentice! How have you been? And that fairy, Lu, was it—”

Levena, watching from the side, furrowed her brow.

She knows Sena too?

Ariel already had a history with Liana, which made sense. Ariel had explored the Elven Forest recently.

But Sena too?

And from what Lakia had mentioned, Ariel had saved Sion, the Hero, from being beaten up in an alleyway.

So she knows the whole party?

Was this mere coincidence or fate?

Levena felt dizzy for a moment but quickly refocused.

“Shriek!”

Dozens of orcs were charging toward them.

“Take care of them, Ariel! They were really mean to me!”

Sena clung to Ariel like a child tattling to their parent.

“Punish them, Ariel!”

Ariel nodded.

Beside her, Urkanos drew his club, stomping forward.

What followed was nothing short of a massacre.

Chapter 130: The Demon King's Army (4)

Crunch!

A heavy sound reverberated through the tranquil forest.

It was unsettling—a grim, bone-crushing noise made by Urkanos's club slamming into an orc.

Crunch!

Urkanos's fighting style was simple.

He either swung his club horizontally or brought it down vertically. No intricate techniques, just raw power.

Yet every swing was fatal.

Skulls caved in, torsos twisted at impossible angles—it was a brutal, gruesome sight.

Levena turned pale and shut her eyes tightly, horrified by the scene.

Even Sena quietly looked away, unable to stomach the carnage.

Crunch!

"Nice, Urkanos!"

Only Liana seemed to enjoy it.

"Well done, Urkanos!"

As a warrior, Liana valued strength above all else.

Naturally, she was exhilarated by Urkanos's sheer destructive might.

Crunch!

Before long, the battle was over.

The dozens of orcs targeting Sena now lay scattered across the forest floor, reduced to bloody heaps.

Standing in the middle of the carnage, Urkanos wore his trademark self-assured grin.

"That's impressive," Liana said, her face flushed.

"He's incredibly strong. And, uh, down there too, he's quite...."

"Sena, are you hurt?"

Levena interrupted, focusing on Sena instead.

Sena mentioned a minor head injury, which Levena quickly healed with holy magic.

Once healed, Sena walked over to one of the fallen orcs and retrieved her *Mana Amplification Circlet*.

The circlet was caked in orc blood, so she had to clean it with a spell.

"We just need to find one more person," Levena said.

With both Liana and Sena accounted for, all that remained was finding Sion, the Hero.

"Let's hope Sir Sion is safe...."

Levena couldn't shake the worry gnawing at her.

Given the state she'd found Liana and Sena in, she feared Sion might not fare any better.

Her instincts proved correct.

The group set off to search for Sion.

Before long, they spotted something lying near a bush—a sword.

“Isn’t that...?”

Sena trailed off, while Liana nodded.

“It seems familiar.”

Levena, however, gasped in shock.

“T-That’s the Hero’s Sword!”

They approached the sword cautiously.

Up close, there was no doubt—it was indeed *Excalibur*, the Hero’s legendary weapon.

But why was it abandoned in the forest?

There was no one else around.

“Could he be dead?” Sena asked casually.

“It’s possible,” Liana agreed.

“No....”

Levena’s expression grew grave.

“If the Hero’s Sword is here, Sir Sion might be in grave danger. We need to search for him quickly....”

Before she could finish, Ariel, perched on Urkanos’s shoulder, leapt down gracefully.

She walked over to *Excalibur* and reached for it.

“Ariel, that sword can only be wielded by the Hero,” Levena cautioned.

But Ariel picked it up effortlessly.

As her hand wrapped around the hilt, the air seemed to hum with power for a moment, but nothing more.

“Huh? Ariel, you can hold it? Then he’s definitely dead. Looks like Ariel is the new Hero,” Sena remarked.

Liana nodded.

“Only the Hero can wield that sword. Ariel is the Elf Hero, so it makes sense.”

“No....”

Levena’s voice trembled as her eyes welled with tears.

Why were they so quick to accept this?

Sena crossed her arms.

“Honestly, I had my doubts about him from the start. Didn’t feel like a real Hero, you know?”

“Agreed. I always thought, ‘That guy looks like he’ll die young.’ Guess I wasn’t wrong.”

“And he was just a vagabond, wasn’t he?”

“Hmm.”

They even started gossiping about him.

Levena tried to calm them down.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. We need to find him. He might just be in trouble!”

“Ugh.”

Neither Sena nor Liana looked particularly interested.

If anything, they seemed annoyed.

“Can’t we just head to the north already?”

“Yeah, I’m hungry and want to wash up.”

Levena turned to Ariel for help.

But Ariel was silently staring at the Hero’s Sword, deep in thought.

“Ariel, what are you doing?”

Without looking up, Ariel replied, “Talking to it.”

“To... the sword?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s it saying?”

“It’s asking for help.”

“...What?”

“And it says Sion isn’t dead.”

“Really? Where is he?”

Ariel pointed toward a nearby cliff.

“He fell down there.”

Despite Sena and Liana’s reluctance, Levena led the group down the cliff to search for Sion.

At the bottom, they found a large pond.

In the middle of the pond stood a massive green frog—a *Greentoad*, a monster.

“Look over there!”

Levena shouted, pointing at the Greentoad.

Something was sticking out of its mouth—a human leg.

The rest of the body was already halfway swallowed, leaving only the leg visible.

Judging by the boots, it had to be...

“Sir Sion is being eaten!”

At Levena’s cry, Sena stifled a laugh, and Liana clicked her tongue in disapproval, having conveniently forgotten their own earlier predicaments.

Levena, however, turned to Ariel.

Or rather, Urkanos, as Ariel was too busy fiddling with him.

By this point, Urkanos was already striding toward the Greentoad with his club in hand.

Even in the pond, the water barely reached his ankles.

The Greentoad paid him no mind, focused solely on swallowing Sion.

Once within reach, Urkanos raised his club high.

Wham!

The club struck the Greentoad’s stomach with a resounding thud.

Its eyes bulged in shock, and it promptly spat out Sion before collapsing sideways, dead.

“Sir Sion!”

Levena rushed to Sion’s side.

Covered in sticky slime, he was unconscious.

“Healing!”

Levena cast a healing spell, and moments later, Sion groaned and opened his eyes.

“Ah... where am I...?”

“Sir Sion, are you alright?”

“Le-Levena...? I had a terrible dream... I was being eaten by a giant frog... wait, that wasn’t a dream, was it?”

His gaze landed on the lifeless Greentoad, and his face paled.

Sena smirked.

“It wasn’t a dream. You were really being eaten.”

Sion groaned, covering his face with a hand.

“I’m sorry. It’s disgraceful for a Hero to be caught like that... The flood threw me off, and I hit my head. Oh, and I lost my sword.”

Ariel silently handed him *Excalibur*.

Sion managed an awkward laugh as he accepted it.

“Thank you for finding it... Wait. How did you—no, hold on....”

His eyes widened as recognition dawned.

“A-Ariel?”

“Long time no see.”

As Ariel spoke softly, Sion leapt to his feet.

“Ariel!”

He rushed toward her for a hug but was promptly blocked by Sena and Liana.

“Don’t touch my apprentice with your filthy body.”

“Don’t sully the Elf Hero, you disgraceful Hero.”

Their icy glares were more fitting for an enemy than an ally.

“....”

Sion looked visibly hurt.

For now, he decided he should clean himself up.

After parting ways with Ariel in Goldcastle, Sion had worked tirelessly to improve himself.

He trained relentlessly in swordsmanship and etiquette, determined to live up to the title of Hero.

According to *Excalibur*, Sion hadn't been chosen as a Hero.

It had been a fluke when he drew the sword.

Yet he pushed himself, wanting to repay the faith people had in him.

Then came his chance—news of the Demon King's Army gathering in the north.

He had set out with the Hero Party, buoyed by the cheers of the Empire's people.

But within a day, they were scattered by a flood.

Now reunited, they were in disarray.

Still, Sion resolved to prove himself.

“Shriek!”

A shadow descended from the sky, accompanied by a gust of wind.

It was a massive, black-scaled monster—a Black Wyvern.

“Stand back. I'll handle this.”

Drawing his sword, Sion stepped forward.

This was his chance to redeem himself.

“Don't waste your energy. Just let Urkanos deal with it,” Liana muttered.

“Yeah, if you get eaten again, we’re not saving you,” Sena added.

Ignoring them, Sion braced himself as the Black Wyvern charged.

With a burst of golden light, he launched himself forward, *Excalibur* gleaming in his hands.

“Raaagh!”

Chapter 131: The Demon King's Army (5)

Whoosh!

A radiant wave of golden energy surged from Sion's sword, cutting through the air.

It shimmered brilliantly, a light so powerful it seemed capable of banishing all darkness.

However, the Black Wyvern twisted its body mid-air, narrowly avoiding the attack. Sion's strike only grazed its wing, leaving a shallow cut.

[Focus, Sion! The Black Wyvern is not an opponent to be taken lightly!]

The voice of *Excalibur* echoed in his mind.

Sion nodded, his face set in determination.

"I know, Excalibur. I'll defeat it. I'll prove my skill to everyone."

Just then, black mist began to swirl from the wyvern's mouth.

The ominous mist expanded, enveloping the surrounding area in shadow.

[Be careful, Sion! That's its Dark Breath!]

Excalibur's warning came just in time.

A torrent of dark energy burst forth from the wyvern, surging toward Sion.

Gritting his teeth, he swung his sword with all his might.

Whoosh!

Golden energy radiated from Excalibur, cutting through the darkness like a beacon of hope.

[Well done, Sion! Now, press the attack!]

“Got it!”

Sion’s eyes gleamed with renewed determination as he dashed toward the Black Wyvern.

The creature lashed out with its talons, but Sion deftly raised his sword to block the attack.

Years of relentless training paid off as Sion parried the blow with precision.

He raised his sword high and shouted, “Light, guide me!”

In response, Excalibur began to glow even brighter, its radiance almost blinding.

[That’s it, Sion! Pour all your will into me!]

Golden runes etched themselves onto Excalibur’s blade as light engulfed Sion.

“Haahh!”

Like a blazing sun, Sion radiated power.

[Now’s the time! Deliver the final blow!]

Nodding, Sion channeled all his strength into one last attack.

“Judgment of the Sun!”

A massive wave of golden energy surged forward, swallowing the Black Wyvern whole.

Boom!

The explosion rocked the area, leaving nothing of the wyvern but ash.

Peace returned to the forest, the silence only broken by the soft rustling of leaves.

Sion landed gracefully, his silhouette framed by the fading light.

In that moment, he looked every bit the Hero he was meant to be.

If the citizens of the Empire had witnessed this scene, they would have erupted in thunderous applause.

[You did it, Sion! You're truly a Hero now!]

Excalibur's praise filled Sion's heart with pride.

Finally, he thought.

Finally, he'd done something worthy of his title. Surely, the Hero Party would acknowledge him now.

Surely...

"...That's the kind of man I like."

A voice broke the silence.

It was Liana, the Elf Warrior.

"A strong, silent type. And someone who's... impressive down there. My ideal man, really."

Sion blinked in confusion.

"...Impressive down there?"

Turning his head, he saw Liana staring dreamily at Urkanos.

"If I were to marry, it'd definitely be to someone like him."

Beside her, Levena looked completely dumbfounded.

“Liana, it’s just a mannequin. It’s not even a person....”

“I know that. But it doesn’t matter. Whether he’s a mannequin or not, love conquers all.”

Sion froze, dumbstruck.

Wait.

Did they not see my fight just now?

From nearby, Sena’s voice drifted over.

“And then in the next dungeon, I poured water on that merchant guy. He wouldn’t stop smoking, and honestly, it was driving me crazy....”

Sena was casually chatting with Ariel, sitting on a tree stump as though nothing had happened.

It hit Sion like a punch to the gut.

No one had been watching.

“....”

The forest blurred as tears welled in his eyes, but he swallowed them back.

He was a Hero.

He couldn’t cry.

Clenching his fists, he tilted his head skyward, trying to hold back the sting of rejection.

[S-Sion... it was an incredible fight! The Black Wyvern is no ordinary foe, and you handled it with such...]

Even Excalibur’s attempts at comfort felt hollow.

The wound to his pride was already too deep.

“Wait, it’s over?”

Sena finally stood up, looking around.

Sion nodded silently, sheathing Excalibur with a resigned sigh.

“Well, you could’ve told us,” Liana grumbled.

Levena offered a passing “Good job” before moving on.

Ariel merely gave Sion a small nod, her expression unreadable.

What Sion longed to hear—something like “*Amazing! That was incredible! You’re the Hero we need!*”—never came.

“Alright, let’s head for the north!”

Sena’s voice rang out cheerfully, and the group resumed their journey.

Trailing behind, Sion walked with slumped shoulders, each step heavy.

Not that anyone noticed.

In the Empire’s largest printing house, *Lexicon*, a young girl sat in the waiting room.

Her pretty face, framed by luxurious golden hair, radiated an air of nobility.

Yet her appearance was peculiar—she wore a rabbit costume.

It was Lakia.

Perched on her lap was Lu, a winged fairy, who flitted about excitedly.

“Wow, Lakia, this place feels so... grand. It’s like you can just smell the knowledge here.”

Lu’s gaze darted around the high-ceilinged room, admiring the chandeliers and dark wooden paneling.

Shelves filled with books published by *Lexicon* lined the walls.

“As expected of the Empire’s largest printing house. The atmosphere is so refined.”

Lakia nodded absently, her expression indifferent.

“...Ariel is heading to the north. Should we follow her, Lu?”

She idly toyed with the golden ring on her finger—the *Golden Lover’s Ring*, a magical item that let her track Ariel’s location.

Currently, Ariel was en route to the northern front.

Lu hovered mid-air, deep in thought.

“She’s probably fine with the Hero Party. They’re going to beat the Demon King’s Army, right? She doesn’t need us.”

“But I want to see Ariel again.”

“She’ll be back soon. By then, my book will be finished, too!”

Lu patted the manuscript in her hands, her face brimming with pride.

The document chronicled their recent adventures, detailing the discovery of the ancient giants who still lived in *Azgrad*, an alternate dimension where time flowed differently.

It omitted certain details, like the dimensional rift, but the manuscript vividly described the giants’ lives and their connection to the present world.

“This book is going to make me famous! Maybe even more famous than Eras. Just imagine the prestige!”

Lu’s excitement was palpable, but Lakia remained disinterested.

To her, such fame was as nourishing as stale bread.

Soon, the waiting room door creaked open, and a middle-aged man walked in.

His slicked-back hair and neatly trimmed mustache gave him an air of sophistication.

“Hmph.”

The man surveyed the room, his gaze briefly settling on Lakia and Lu before his expression soured.

‘A joke, surely.’

He’d expected a thrilling tale of adventure.

Instead, he found a girl in a rabbit costume and a tiny fairy.

This wasn’t worth his time.

Before he could leave, Lu fluttered up to him, manuscript in hand.

“Hello! This is my account of finding the giants. It’s an amazing story about—”

“No.”

The man cut her off, waving dismissively.

“There’s no need to read it.”

“...What?”

Crossing his arms, he sighed dramatically.

“This is *Lexicon*, the Empire’s largest printing house. Do you know why we’re the best?”

Lu blinked, unsure how to respond.

The man continued, his tone condescending.

“Because we don’t waste our time on amateur drivel. We publish *real* stories, written by *real* adventurers. Who cares about the ramblings of a rabbit-costumed girl and her pet fairy?”

“...But...”

“No buts. Look at her,” he sneered, gesturing to Lakia. “Who’s going to believe she went on some grand adventure?”

Lu’s wings drooped, her confidence crumbling.

The man turned, ready to leave.

But then—

“Hey.”

Lakia’s voice stopped him cold.

A dark aura of mana began to swirl around her as she grabbed his shoulder.

“Say that again, *human*.”

Chapter 132: The Demon King's Army (6)

The *Lexicon* was the Empire's largest printing house. Handling significant books and documents meant its security was among the strictest.

Well-trained guards were stationed at all times, and the Imperial Security Force could respond immediately to any disturbances.

In addition, magical detection systems covered the entire building, triggering alarms the moment mana was summoned.

Currently, *Lexicon* was in a state of emergency.

The alarm had gone off because *Lakia* had summoned mana.

When mana was detected, *Lexicon's* doors would lock, and mana-suppression systems would activate throughout the building.

"Haha."

The man chuckled.

"I thought you were just some eccentric noble girl in a bunny costume, but you're a magician, huh?"

He brushed off *Lakia's* hand from his shoulder with a sharp slap.

"And not just eccentric. You're downright stupid. Do you have any idea what you've done? Summoning mana in *Lexicon* of all places?"

It wasn't uncommon for someone to summon mana in *Lexicon*.

Many coveted the valuable manuscripts and books stored here, occasionally attempting theft through magical means.

When such incidents occurred, alarms would sound, mana suppression would activate, and the intruder would quickly be subdued by guards.

They would then be handed over to the Imperial Security Force for severe punishment.

“Magicians are all the same,” the man sneered, jabbing a finger at Lakia’s forehead.

“Always pulling stunts when things don’t go their way. No sense of time or place. And once the suppression kicks in, you’re all helpless.”

Crunch.

Suddenly, Lakia bit down on the man’s finger.

“!”

The man’s eyes widened in shock before he let out an ear-splitting scream.

“Aaagh!!”

Flailing wildly, the man tried to yank his hand free, but Lakia held firm, her face calm and unyielding.

“You lunatic! Let go! Let go now!!”

He slapped at Lakia’s face with his free hand, but she refused to release his finger.

“How dare you hit her!”

Lu tossed aside her manuscript, flew up, and bit the man’s ear.

“Aaagh! These maniacs! Guards! Guards!!”

The door to the waiting room burst open, and several guards stormed in.

“Stop this at once!”

The guards wore black uniforms emblazoned with Lexicon's emblem on their shoulders and chest.

Each carried a weapon—batons, swords, spears—and wore belts equipped with mana-suppressing cuffs and silver wires designed to disrupt magical flows.

Their presence was a testament to Lexicon's robust security measures.

“Stand down immediately!”

At the guards' command, Lakia released the man's finger and stepped back.

Lu flew to Lakia's shoulder.

“Hah, I've seen some crazy people in my time, but this...!”

The man clutched his bleeding finger and ear, his face contorted in rage.

“Biting someone's finger and ear?! You'll pay for this, I swear!”

He continued to shout furiously, but Lakia and Lu paid him no mind.

“Are you okay, Lakia?”

Lu wiped the blood from Lakia's mouth and examined her face, which was red and swollen from being hit.

“I'm fine. I was tempted to rip his finger off, but I held back.”

“You should've done it.”

“Ariel wouldn't like that.”

Lakia's restraint was surprising, given her temper.

Though she longed to turn the man and the building to ash, she knew Ariel preferred peaceful resolutions.

She also thought of Levena.

As the Empire's saintess, Levena would be saddened if a major incident occurred in the Empire.

"But he hit you. That makes me angry," Lu muttered.

Lakia scoffed.

"His punches didn't hurt. What bothers me is how he insulted you—and Ariel. A mere human, daring to act like that."

Hearing this, the man gawked at them in disbelief.

"...You're both completely insane! Guards! Arrest them already!"

At his command, the guards advanced toward Lakia and Lu.

"Come quietly."

The guards seemed hesitant to use force, likely because Lakia looked like a young girl.

But Lakia had no intention of going quietly.

Crackle.

Mana surged around Lakia again, causing the guards to freeze mid-step.

".....?"

This shouldn't have been possible.

With the mana-suppression systems active, no one could draw mana in this building.

"How is this happening? Mana should be suppressed...."

One guard muttered in disbelief as Lakia smirked.

"Did you really think such primitive devices could contain me, human?"

The mana around Lakia grew denser, radiating a suffocating aura.

The guards began to back away, their weapons trembling in their hands. The man turned pale, too shocked to speak.

“If I wanted to, I could reduce you all to ashes. But I’ll be generous this time. So in my presence....”

Lakia’s eyes glowed gold.

[“**Begone.**”]

She unleashed her *Dragon Fear*.

“!!”

The guards dropped their weapons and collapsed, some fainting on the spot.

“Ugh... ugh....”

The remaining guards shivered, unable to regain their composure.

Lakia strode forward, unbothered.

Lu quickly gathered the scattered manuscript pages, while Lakia approached the man and struck him on the head.

Thud!

It was a solid hit, and the man crumpled unconscious.

Thanks to the *Dragon Fear*, Lakia and Lu left Lexicon unchallenged.

“Are you okay with not publishing your book, Lu?”

Lakia asked as they walked away.

Lu nodded.

“We can go to another printing house. Lexicon isn’t the only one in the Empire.”

Though she said that, Lu had hoped to publish her book at Lexicon.

Books printed there were the most popular and carried an air of prestige.

But given the situation, she had no choice.

“Alright, let’s try somewhere else,” Lakia said, gently patting Lu with her bunny costume’s paw.

Lu’s voice wavered with emotion.

“...Thanks for coming with me, Lakia.”

“It was no big deal. Let’s find another printing house and then get something to eat.”

“But... we’re broke, aren’t we?”

“I have some money. Levena gave me....”

Before Lakia could finish, a group of armed soldiers appeared, blocking their path.

They were the Imperial Security Force.

Clad in sturdy armor and red capes, their helmets were adorned with crimson plumes, and their chests bore the Empire’s emblem.

Unlike Lexicon’s guards, they all carried identical spears.

“Hold it right there,” one soldier ordered, his tone brooking no argument.

His sharp gaze suggested they wouldn’t hesitate to use force, even against a young girl.

Lakia whispered to Lu, “Run.”

She turned and bolted, her bunny costume flapping comically as she ran.

Despite her awkward appearance, she moved surprisingly fast, her dragon stamina allowing her to outpace most humans.

“After her!”

The soldiers gave chase.

Though Lakia was swift, the Imperial Security Force knew the city like the back of their hands. It wasn't long before they encircled her in the middle of a busy street.

Onlookers watched curiously as a bunny-suited girl stood surrounded by armored soldiers.

The soldiers closed in, their formation tightening.

Lakia glanced around, realizing she had no easy escape.

If she didn't use magic, breaking through would be nearly impossible.

But most of her spells were unsuitable for the situation.

Flight magic would trigger the city's barriers, and teleportation was too risky.

She sighed, deciding her best option was to undo her *Polymorph* and escape as a dragon.

She began removing the bunny costume to avoid tearing it during the transformation.

“Lakia...”

Lu looked worried.

“Are you really going to do that? Everyone's watching....”

“I have no choice.”

Dragons didn't normally wear clothes, so it didn't bother Lakia to strip.

But just as she was about to transform, someone stepped forward.

“Wait a moment....”

A red-haired girl in an elegant dress emerged from the crowd.

“Could it be...? Are you the one who saved my brother and me at Goldcastle?”

The girl studied Lakia intently before nodding.

“Yes, it’s you. And the fairy....”

“?”

Lakia and Lu tilted their heads in confusion.

The girl quickly introduced herself.

“You might not recognize me. I looked very different back then. I’m Clara, Sion’s sister....”

“Sion?”

Lu’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, that little Hero kid!”

They remembered her now. Back at Goldcastle, Sion’s bedraggled sister had been with him when they saved them.

A well-dressed blonde girl stepped forward, exuding elegance and nobility.

“Clara, do you know them?”

Clara nodded.

“Yes, they saved my brother and me.”

“Really? They saved Sir Sion?”

The blonde girl turned to Lakia and Lu, offering a refined smile.

“I see you’re in a bit of trouble,” she said, glancing at the surrounding soldiers.

“Have you committed some crime...?”

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” Lu interrupted.

“It’s just a misunderstanding.”

“Is that so?”

The blonde girl regarded them thoughtfully before turning to the soldiers.

“Loyal defenders of the Empire, I thank you for your service.”

Her voice carried an air of authority.

“But these two are the benefactors of Hero Sion. Whatever misunderstanding may have occurred, I, Princess Illiana, will vouch for their integrity.”

Chapter 133: Demon King's Army (7)

Clara was originally a vagrant.

Together with her brother Sion, she wandered the slums of Goldcastle, barely surviving each day.

They scavenged trash bins or begged for meals, and at night, they would huddle together in dirty alleys to sleep.

Severe hunger and brutal cold.

The siblings' young lives were an endless struggle, a series of uncertain days where death could come at any time.

But fate is always unpredictable.

When Sion pulled the Hero's Sword, everything changed.

Overnight, Sion became the most important person in the Empire, and Clara's life transformed completely.

People treated Sion with the utmost respect, and Clara was also met with courtesy and honor.

Where before they had faced disgust and scorn, they now received reverence and admiration.

A large mansion in the Imperial capital, loyal servants and stewards, trustworthy knights, and wealth enough to last a lifetime were all now theirs.

Clara could now wake up each morning to a warm bath, don a

beautiful dress, and enjoy a luxurious meal.

Her days were filled with leisurely strolls through the mansion gardens with attendants or exploring the Imperial city center under the protection of knights.

A life as opulent as that of any noble.

But Clara never forgot.

Being pelted with stones in the streets, being chased by guards, the gnawing hunger, the freezing cold...

All of it remained vividly in her memory, and she lived each day with gratitude.

Most importantly, she never forgot her gratitude to Ariel and her party, who saved her and Sion in Goldcastle's alleys.

If it weren't for them, Sion and Clara would have lost their lives that day.

Fortunately, Ariel's party saved them, allowing them to enjoy the lives they had now.

"So never forget, Clara. We owe them a great debt. And we must also be grateful to the Empire. To the people who believe in me."

Her brother Sion always said such things.

"I will prove it. That I am a true Hero. When the Empire is in danger, I'll be the first to step forward and fight. That is my destiny. That is how I protect the people, and above all, how I protect you."

Clara respected her brother deeply.

He could have taken some time to enjoy the luxury now afforded to them, but Sion relentlessly pushed himself.

Not a single day went by without swordsmanship training, nor did he

ever neglect studying Imperial etiquette or culture.

“And one day, when we meet Ariel again, I want to show her a cool side of me. A truly heroic image. That would be the best way to repay her kindness.”

Hearing this, Clara quietly smiled.

“You’ll definitely be able to do that, Brother.”

The guards quietly withdrew.

Princess Illiana had vouched for Lakia and Lu’s identity.

That alone ended the matter.

Whatever crimes Lakia and Lu had committed, they were now beyond the guards’ reach.

“Thank you, Your Highness, for helping them....”

Clara bowed respectfully to Illiana.

But Illiana gently shook her head, smiling warmly.

“No need for that. If they’re benefactors of Hero Sion, they’re also benefactors of the Empire. Especially in times like these.”

The “times like these” referred to the war against the Demon King’s army.

“Besides, we’re friends, Clara. If you wish to help them, then so will I.”

“Your Highness....”

Since arriving in the Imperial capital, Clara had made many friends.

The mansion's servants, stewards, and even knights had all become good friends, and even Princess Illiana frequently visited to spend time with her.

Recently, Illiana had been relying heavily on Clara emotionally.

Particularly for advice on romance, though Clara often found herself at a loss for words.

No matter how much Illiana asked about men, Clara, who until recently had wandered the slums, knew nothing about such matters.

Illiana's object of interest was Duke Karl Kastark of the North.

Apparently, Duke Karl was incredibly handsome and had a captivating personality.

He was the darling of high society and had even captured Illiana's heart.

Given the political alliances between the royal family and the North, and their similar ages, it seemed likely they would marry.

But recently, strange rumors had been circulating.

It was said that Duke Karl had courted an elf but was rejected.

This rumor had deeply unsettled Illiana, leading her to consult Clara frequently.

"Could Duke Karl really have done that? No matter how beautiful the elf, to ignore me? I'm pretty decent, aren't I? Hmm? Really? Oh, thanks for the compliment. Anyway, Duke Karl barely glanced at me during my birthday party. He just stared blankly out the window, and even when we danced, his eyes seemed unfocused. Do you think the elf rumor is true? If it is, how can I...."

She would go on and on like this.

Today, Clara and Illiana were on their way to Delight, a shop in the heart of the Imperial capital, while discussing Karl Kastark.

On the way, they saw Lakia and Lu being chased by guards, leading to the current situation.

“What were the two of you being chased by guards for?”

Illiana asked Lakia and Lu.

She had been eyeing Lakia’s bunny costume since earlier, and Clara thought Illiana might want it.

Given Illiana’s usual fondness for cute things, the outfit was undoubtedly tempting.

Frankly, Clara wanted it too.

“We were trying to publish a book.”

Lu, perched on Lakia’s shoulder, answered.

Lu was holding a bundle of manuscripts, and Clara found it amazing that the small fairy could carry so much.

“You were trying to publish a book?”

Illiana seemed intrigued.

“What kind of book?”

“It’s about the ancient giants. During our recent adventure, we discovered a world where they still live.”

“What?”

Illiana’s eyes widened.

“Is that true? But aren’t the giants extinct?”

“I thought so too... but they aren’t. They’re thriving in another

dimension. All the details are in this manuscript.”

Lu spoke proudly, and Illiana couldn’t hide her excitement.

“Can I read that manuscript? I’m dying to! If it’s true, it’s amazing. Another dimension? How did you get there? No, never mind, just let me read it....”

Illiana’s eyes sparkled as if she might snatch the manuscript.

Clara was also intrigued.

She didn’t know much about giants, but the idea that such massive beings still existed in another dimension was fascinating.

“This manuscript details conversations I had with the giants and describes their village in great detail. Plus, my sister received a gift from their leader: Urkanos, a model made in the image of the giant god....”

Lu trailed off, and Illiana grabbed Clara’s hand, stomping her feet in excitement.

She seemed desperate to read the manuscript, but Lu didn’t offer to show it.

“I’d rather publish this manuscript as a book first. That’s why we went to Lexicon... but they ignored us. They wouldn’t even look at the manuscript because Lakia was wearing a bunny costume and I’m a fairy....”

Lu sounded bitter, and Lakia patted her with a bunny-paw hand.

A girl in a bunny costume and a fairy...

Even Clara thought it sounded a bit ridiculous. But Lu’s sincerity about the manuscript was evident.

“Well, I can see why. Lexicon is the largest publisher in the Empire....”

Lu sighed.

“They probably don’t have time for a fairy’s manuscript.”

“No, that’s unfair. What if they miss a truly great manuscript? The one you’re holding is incredibly valuable. Publishing it would cause a sensation.”

Illiana’s words brightened Lu’s expression.

“Actually, I think so too. If this manuscript becomes a book, it’ll be hugely famous. It’s amazing—ancient giants still exist! That’s groundbreaking! But....”

Lu hesitated.

“We can’t go back to Lexicon anymore. We caused a scene there, which is why the guards were chasing us.”

Lu recounted what had happened in Lexicon’s waiting room.

How Lakia had bitten a man’s finger, and Lu had bitten his ear.

“You should’ve gone further! Bite his finger off and rip his ear out!”

Illiana exclaimed without hesitation.

“What an arrogant man! I hate people like that—nobles who rely solely on their status and look down on others. He seemed proud of Lexicon, but doesn’t he realize that Lexicon owes its success to manuscripts like yours? How dare he turn his nose up at them now? I should meet that man myself!”

Illiana paused to catch her breath before continuing.

“But first, let’s find another publisher. I’m dying to read your manuscript. With content like that, it doesn’t have to be Lexicon. Any publisher will do—once the book is out, it’ll cause a sensation.”

A mischievous smile played on Illiana’s lips.

“This might even be a chance to teach Lexicon a lesson. Let’s publish it elsewhere, and when it becomes famous, I’ll spread the word among the nobles. Ancient giants still exist! It’ll be huge news, and Lexicon will regret their short-sightedness.”

Illiana seemed more eager than Lu to see the manuscript published.

Quietly, Clara spoke up.

“There’s a publisher I know... They usually only make children’s books, but if I explain, they might agree to publish your manuscript.”

Clara regularly volunteered at an orphanage in the Imperial capital.

She did so to remember her past and to help children in need.

She cooked for them, washed their clothes and bedding, and sometimes read them storybooks, which they loved.

Clara, still learning to read, would stumble through the stories, but the children listened intently.

Before visiting the orphanage, Clara would stop by a small publisher called Biblia.

Biblia was unique in that its owner wrote and sold children’s stories, which were very entertaining.

The stories, about the adventures of a young elf, were only available at Biblia and were hugely popular with the orphanage children.

“Biblia might agree to publish your manuscript.”

Clara had become quite close with Biblia’s owner, as she was the only one buying his books.

Despite the stories’ charm, the publisher was tucked away in a corner of the city, and most people preferred books from larger publishers like Lexicon.

Even Clara had only found it by chance.

“But will a publisher that only makes children’s books accept my manuscript? It’s not a storybook—it’s a real adventure.”

Lu expressed doubt, but Clara nodded slowly.

“The owner always told me that if I ever wanted anything, whether a storybook or not, he’d make it for me. If we take your manuscript and ask, I’m sure he’ll turn it into a book.”

Chapter 134: Demon King's Army (8)

"Look, there's a village!"

Sena, the mage walking at the front, shouted.

"Shall we stay there for the night?"

The sun was slowly setting.

Even for a hero's party, walking through the night wasn't a feasible option.

If a village was nearby, staying there was the logical choice.

"That sounds good."

Liana, the elf warrior, nodded in agreement.

Hearing this, Saintess Levena turned her gaze to Sion, the hero, trailing behind them sluggishly.

"Sir Sion, are you alright?"

"Huh? Oh, yes?"

Sion flinched and lifted his head.

Lost in his own thoughts, he hadn't been listening to the group's conversation.

"Um, what were you saying?"

"We were thinking of staying at that village tonight. What do you think?"

Levena pointed toward the village ahead, and Sion, looking at it,

nodded.

“That sounds good. Everyone hasn’t been able to rest properly.”

Everyone looked exhausted except Ariel.

Having been delayed by the flood, they had been traveling relentlessly.

“Do you think there’ll be an inn?”

Sena asked, her voice tinged with excitement.

“I can’t wait to take a hot bath. I feel so gross after the flood. Hey, should we all bathe together?”

A mischievous grin spread across Sena’s face.

She glanced at each party member one by one—Ariel, Liana, and Levena.

Ariel silently averted her gaze, Liana’s expression remained stoic, and Levena blushed and shrank back.

“Ah, that’s it! Levena’s reaction sealed it! We’re definitely bathing together!”

Sena playfully lunged toward Levena, who squealed and backed away.

“St-stay away from me!”

“Haha, I love that reaction!”

Like a game of tag, Sena and Levena began running circles around the group.

“This is dizzying,” Liana commented flatly, while Sion simply walked in silence.

From Sion’s perspective, there wasn’t much to say.

It wasn’t like he could respond to Sena’s suggestion with “Oh, sounds great.”

At that moment, Ariel quietly approached him and spoke.

“You were amazing earlier, fighting those monsters.”

“Huh?”

Sion’s face started turning red.

“Y-you saw that...?”

“Yes.”

In Ariel’s eyes, Sion had fought commendably for a hero.

Back when she first saw him at Goldcastle, Sion had been just a scrappy street kid. But in such a short time, he’d grown immensely.

It was something only achievable through extraordinary effort.

“You’ve worked hard all this time,” she said, patting Sion on the shoulder.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Sion raised his gaze to the sky.

He couldn’t utter a word.

If he opened his mouth even slightly, he felt like he might burst into tears.

After a while, the entrance to the village came into view.

Sena and Levena stopped their game of tag and approached the village gate.

The entrance was blocked by a large wooden palisade, but no guards were visible.

“Hello!”

Sena called out cheerfully, and after a moment, a man cautiously appeared above the palisade.

“Wh-who are you...?”

The man asked in a wary voice.

His complexion was pale, and he looked deeply unsettled.

“We’re the hero’s party,” Sion declared boldly, straightening his shoulders.

“We’re on our way north to repel the Demon King’s army. Would it be alright for us to stay here for the night?”

Not long ago, Sion had been timid, but Ariel’s words had bolstered his confidence.

Plus, Princess Iliana had once advised him, “When you reveal yourself as the hero, always stand tall and speak with confidence.”

“H-heroes...?”

The man’s trembling voice came down from the palisade.

“If... if that’s the case, could you perhaps help our village?”

Sion glanced back at his companions before answering.

“Let us hear what’s troubling you. If we can help, we’ll do our best.”

The village was shrouded in an eerie atmosphere.

There wasn’t a soul on the streets, and every window in sight was tightly shut.

The group was led straight to the village chief’s house.

The chief, a stout and robust middle-aged man, looked utterly exhausted, his face marked by deep fatigue.

“What has happened in this village?”

Sion asked, and the chief let out a heavy sigh.

“It began about three days ago... when that unknown monster appeared.”

“An unknown monster?”

“Yes.”

According to the chief, livestock had started being attacked three days ago.

“On the first night, it was five chickens. The next day, ten pigs. And last night, all of our cows.”

The chief’s eyes grew red with tears.

Livestock was the lifeblood of the village.

With most of it gone, their livelihoods were now at grave risk.

“That thing won’t stop until it’s taken all our livestock. And once the animals are gone... it might come for the people.”

The chief fell to his knees before the party.

“Please, heroes, destroy that monster. Save our village... please....”

Trembling, the chief broke down in tears.

Levena knelt to console him, while Sion calmly asked about the monster’s appearance.

The chief’s response was vague.

“I don’t know exactly what it looks like. Even though I stayed up all three nights guarding the village, I never saw it directly. It’s like... a shadow passed by, and then the animals were left barely alive.”

“Barely alive?”

“Yes. Their blood had been drained. That monster doesn’t kill outright—it drains their blood until they’re on the verge of death. Then, if they die, it takes their corpses. It even digs up ones we bury....”

Most of the livestock had been attacked, but only a few had actually died so far.

“Once they’re in that state, they don’t last long. Soon, they’ll all die. And the monster... it’s waiting for that. For some reason, it seems to want the corpses.”

Hearing this, Levena asked,

“Where are the livestock now? The ones that are barely alive?”

“They’re in the village square barn, but why do you ask...?”

“I can use healing magic. I might be able to save them.”

“R-really?”

Hope lit up the chief’s face.

“Please, save them! They’re our most precious resources.”

“I’ll do my best.”

At Levena’s words, the chief quickly stood and led the party to the barn in the village square.

The barn revealed a grim scene.

The livestock lay motionless, barely clinging to life.

Chickens drooped their wings, struggling to breathe, while the pigs and cows were visibly emaciated, letting out weak groans.

Levena, her face filled with compassion, approached them and began casting her healing spell.

“Vital Surge.”

A warm light emanated from Levena’s hands, gently enveloping the animals.

The holy spell, Vital Surge, was a high-level magic capable of rapidly restoring vitality, regenerating blood, and healing tissue.

Slowly, the animals began to recover.

The chickens tried to lift themselves, while the pigs and cows’ groaning subsided.

Sweat poured down Levena’s face.

Being a high-level spell, Vital Surge consumed a tremendous amount

of sacred energy.

Using it on so many animals was an enormous strain, even for a saintess.

“Levena, are you okay?”

Sion asked, his face full of concern, but Levena resolutely nodded.

“I’m... fine... just a little more....”

Ariel wiped the sweat from Levena’s face with her sleeve.

Though Ariel could also use holy magic, she refrained from intervening, wanting to let Levena fulfill her role.

Soon, the livestock fully regained their strength.

The chickens flapped their wings energetically, moving about the barn, while the pigs and cows began to bellow robustly.

Some of the animals even expressed gratitude toward the party.

A chicken perched on Levena’s shoulder, a pig lifted Sena’s skirt, and a cow licked Liana’s cheek.

Even Ariel and Sion found themselves surrounded by grateful animals.

“This... this is a miracle...!”

The chief, overwhelmed with emotion, burst into tears.

“Thank you, heroes... thanks to you, our village is saved... sob....”

The chief bowed repeatedly to the party.

Unaccustomed to such gratitude, the group felt slightly awkward.

Sion spoke.

“Though it’s a relief that the livestock have recovered, this isn’t over yet. We still need to deal with that monster....”

Suddenly, Sion stopped mid-sentence and drew his sword.

“Get down, Sena!”

A massive shadow loomed behind Sena, ready to strike.

Chapter 135: Demon King's Army (9)

The creature was grotesque, with bat-like wings and the head of a wolf.

Its body length surpassed the height of an adult man, and its wingspan was twice that.

It lunged at Sana, aiming to sink its razor-sharp fangs into her neck.

This beast could drain blood in mere moments, and its movement speed was too fast for the human eye to track.

Once it set its sights on prey, it rarely missed its target.

But this time was different.

As it closed in on Sana, the creature suddenly felt its body stiffen.

It was as if an invisible hand had gripped it tightly, rendering it unable to move.

Sion, who had caught sight of the creature, shouted, "Get down, Sana!"

Sana ducked forward, and Sion's sword strike, combined with Liana's arrow, pierced the creature's body.

"Graaaaah!"

Though their attacks were powerful, the creature's skin was as tough as stone, so the wounds weren't fatal.

It could still flee if it wanted...

But that invisible force was the problem.

The creature struggled to turn its head, and when it did, it locked eyes with a glowing red gaze.

It was the gaze of a young elf.

The creature instinctively understood.

This immobilizing force—it was her doing.

Her faint smile confirmed it.

“You vile beast!”

Sana cast her spell.

“Inferno Blast!”

A torrent of searing flames erupted from Sana’s hands, engulfing the creature.

The beast writhed in agony as it burned.

“Graaaaaah!”

Though Sana’s magic was strong, it wasn’t enough to kill the creature outright.

If not for the invisible force holding it down, it would have escaped by now.

But the force refused to let go.

“Everyone, now’s our chance! Let’s finish it together!”

Sion shouted, rallying the party for a final attack.

“Bad luck for it to cross paths with us!”

“Let’s show it who we are!”

Sana summoned another wave of flames, Liana fired a powerful mana-infused arrow, and Sion raised his sword.

“Judgment of the Sun!”

A golden beam of energy slashed through the air.

“Graaaaargh!”

With a final cry, the creature perished, overcome by a mix of frustration and pain.

As the creature died, the villagers emerged from their homes and rushed to the Hero’s party with gratitude.

“You’ve saved us, Heroes...!”

“Thank you so much...!”

The villagers, whose livestock had been rescued and whose tormentor had been vanquished, saw the party as saviors sent from the heavens.

“It’s nothing. We simply did what we had to,” Sion replied humbly.

From the moment he became a Hero, Sion had vowed to fight for the people, even at the cost of his life.

His daily training had finally borne fruit today.

A deep sense of pride swelled in his chest, and he felt tears welling up.

But he had to hold them back.

He was a Hero, after all.

Sana and Liana approached him.

“Thanks for saving me earlier, Sion.”

“You did well, Sion. That was impressive.”

“...”

Sion couldn’t hold back his tears any longer.

It was an ironic moment.

He had wanted to show his best side and had finally earned recognition, only to end up crying like this.

Now he felt like he was back at square one.

Surely, they would mock him as a fool.

“Sion, don’t cry.”

“Yeah, no tears, Sion.”

“We saved the village.”

“It was a team effort.”

Fortunately, Sana and Liana didn’t ridicule him.

Instead, they gently patted his shoulders and comforted him.

“T-Thank you, both of you... I’ll keep trying my best. You two were amazing, too. Sana, your magic, and Liana, your arrows—without you, it would’ve been much harder to defeat that monster.”

As the three exchanged words of encouragement, Levana turned her gaze to Ariel.

Levana and Ariel were sitting together on a nearby rock.

“Ariel, that creature we just fought—I’ve read about it before. It wasn’t just any monster. It was an *Umbrach*, a type of demon beast,” Levana said.

“Umbrachs only consume dead flesh. That’s why it took the corpses of the livestock. Umbrachs are incredibly fast—too fast for the human eye to track—and their skin is as tough as stone, making them extremely difficult to kill. To defeat one, you usually need to trap it with magic or a net. Even if you manage to land a hit, if you don’t finish it off in one strike, it’ll vanish.”

Ariel nodded quietly.

It was indeed fast.

If she hadn’t restrained it with telekinesis, Sana would have been drained of her blood.

“But earlier, the Umbrach couldn’t move, as if it were paralyzed. It just stood there and took Sana’s magic, Liana’s arrow, and Sir Sion’s sword strike. Normally, that’s impossible without magic or a trap. It didn’t even try to evade. It just stood there.”

Levana’s expression made it clear she had realized the truth.

“You held it down on purpose, didn’t you?”

Ariel nodded.

Although she had used her telekinesis, she didn’t deliver the final blow.

Instead, she created an opportunity for Sion, Sana, and Liana to defeat it together.

And now, the result was clear.

Sana and Liana had come to respect Sion.

“I’m glad it worked out....”

Levana gazed at Ariel, her expression a mix of tears and a faint smile.

It was a face that carried two emotions at once.

“Then who’s going to acknowledge you?”

Ariel looked at Levana.

She was about to reply that she didn’t need acknowledgment.

But before she could speak, Levana hugged her tightly.

“I will. Thank you, Ariel.”

The next day, the Hero’s party departed the village amidst farewells from the villagers.

They were given food prepared by the villagers and flower bouquets from cheerful children.

“Take care, Heroes!”

“Defeat the Demon King’s army!”

Sion waved back at the villagers, his eyes already red again.

“Thank you! Stay safe, everyone!”

With that, the party continued their journey northward.

“I finally feel like a real Hero....”

Sion muttered quietly, and Sana playfully nudged his shoulder.

“This is just the beginning, Sion. We haven’t even faced the Demon King’s army yet.”

“Exactly. From now on, the enemies we’ll encounter will be far stronger than that monster.”

Hearing Sana and Liana’s words, Sion’s eyes shone with determination.

“There will be many challenges ahead, but we’re ready. Together, we can face anything.”

Sana and Liana smiled at his words, while Levana’s lips curved into a gentle smile as well.

The atmosphere was filled with hope.

Ariel, however, looked slightly uncomfortable.

Together, we can face anything?

It was great that the Hero’s party was bonding, but lines like that made her cringe.

Regardless, they were nearing the North.

The group quickened their pace and reached their destination, the Kastark Estate, by evening.

Massive walls and towering spires loomed in the distance.

Banners of the Kastark family fluttered atop the walls, and armed guards stood vigilant at the road leading to the castle.

“Impressive,” Sana remarked, and Sion nodded.

“The Kastark family is the strongest in the North.”

When they reached the gates, the guards approached them.

“Are you the Heroes from the capital?”

The guards recognized the party, having anticipated their arrival around this time.

“Please, come in. While Duke Kastark is away on urgent business, his heir, Prince Karl, is expecting you.”

The guards opened the gates, and the party entered the castle.

The interior was as grand as the exterior, with a large central plaza, intricately carved fountains, and tall, sturdy buildings.

The castle’s residents eyed the Heroes with curiosity but refrained from approaching or causing a commotion.

As expected of a household that ruled the North, discipline was evident everywhere.

Meanwhile, Karl Kastark, heir to the North, hurried to the castle’s center upon hearing of the Heroes’ arrival.

With his father away, it was his duty to welcome them.

“Let’s go, Sir Shane,” Karl said.

“Yes, my lord,” replied his knight, who followed closely behind.

As Karl reached the central plaza, the Hero’s party arrived there as well.

“Welcome to the North,” Karl said as he stepped forward.

“I am Karl Kastark, heir of the Kastark family. My father is away on

urgent matters, so I will be hosting you.”

Karl’s gaze swept over the Hero’s party, recognizing them one by one.

Hero Sion, mage Sana, elf warrior Liana, and saint Levana.

“...?”

But there was one extra person.

And it was someone Karl recognized.

A face he had never forgotten, one he had longed to see every day.

“A-Ariel...?”

Karl’s voice trembled.

Chapter 136: Demon King's Army (10)

Karl recalled the first time he had met Ariel.

It had happened on his way to the capital to attend Princess Iliana's birthday party.

At the time, Karl had arrived in the city of Sierra and decided to stay for a day. However, finding the city dull, he had convinced his knight, Shane, to join him on a hunt in the nearby forest.

"If you encounter a monster or beast, do not engage recklessly," Shane had cautioned.

But Karl ignored the warning and loosed an arrow the moment he spotted a silver wolf.

Truthfully, Karl hadn't intended to hunt the wolf.

Startled, he had instinctively fired the arrow without thinking.

The silver wolf was enormous and exuded an almost mystical aura.

Fortunately, the arrow missed. But the wolf roared in fury and charged at Karl.

Had Shane not swiftly drawn his sword and stepped between them, the wolf would have torn Karl's throat out.

"Stay behind me at all costs, young master," Shane warned in a tense voice.

Karl felt a pang of fear.

If Shane, the greatest knight in the North, was this tense, the silver wolf was clearly no ordinary beast.

A suffocating standoff ensued.

Neither the wolf nor Shane dared to make the first move, knowing bloodshed was inevitable if they did.

Thud.

Something light and graceful landed between the wolf and Shane.

“...?”

It was a girl.

A girl with silver hair that fluttered gently, appearing to be Karl’s age.

She gazed calmly at Shane and tucked her hair behind her pointed ears, revealing her identity.

She was an elf.

Karl felt his heart race.

For some reason, he couldn’t take his eyes off her face.

“Is that wolf... yours?”

Shane asked cautiously.

The girl nodded.

“It’s mine,” she replied in a monotone voice.

“Don’t bother it.”

“Understood. There was a misunderstanding, but if you withdraw the wolf, we won’t attack,” Shane said, sheathing his sword and straightening his posture.

“I serve the Kastark family of the North, and the young man behind me is their heir—”

The girl wasn’t listening.

She had turned away and was now standing on tiptoe, gently stroking the silver wolf's chin.

"Hmm..." Shane cleared his throat awkwardly before addressing Karl.

"Young master, perhaps we should return to the city. Today is—"

But before Shane could finish, Karl stepped forward and shouted.

"Hey, elf! How dare you act so arrogantly? Do you know who I am? I'm Karl Kastark, heir of the North's grand duchy! State your name and show proper respect!"

"...!"

Shane stared at Karl in shock, but Karl didn't care.

He knew something was off with him.

His heart was racing uncontrollably.

He felt the need to vent his feelings, to assert dominance over this elf girl using his status if necessary.

But the girl remained unfazed.

She cast a disinterested glance at Karl before effortlessly mounting the wolf.

As she did, a faint smile graced her lips, and Karl felt his head spin.

"Hey! Elf!"

He shouted even louder.

"Get down from that wolf! I'm speaking to you! How dare you be so insolent—"

It was no use.

The girl gently patted the wolf's head, whispering as if speaking to a beloved pet.

“Let’s go, Ghost.”

The wolf leapt into the air and disappeared into the forest with the girl on its back.

Karl collapsed to the ground.

A sense of desolation swept over him as he thought he might never see her again.

Should I not have gotten angry? Should I have spoken kindly instead?

But he doubted it would have made a difference.

The girl hadn’t even glanced at him properly.

While noble girls his age were always sneaking glances at his face, this elf girl had paid him no attention at all.

Karl eventually returned to Sierra, feeling hollow.

If only he could see her again.

The very next day, he did.

“You! You’re—!”

He saw her in front of a pastry shop in Sierra.

“Elf! What are you doing here?”

Karl’s reaction was intense, but the girl merely gave him a blank glance before continuing on her way.

It was an obvious act of dismissal.

“Stop!”

Karl yelled, forgetting all decorum.

“Stop, I said! Damn elf!”

“Young master...”

Shane tried to calm him down.

“This place is full of nobles. They will recognize you.”

Karl knew this, of course.

His behavior would undoubtedly spark gossip and tarnish the Kastark family’s reputation.

But...

“Elf! Stop! That’s an order! Stop right now!”

At that moment, nothing else mattered.

Karl had lost all self-control.

He had to talk to her, no matter what.

Eventually, the girl stopped and turned to look at him.

“?”

She seemed puzzled.

Karl strode up to her, his eyes wide with emotion.

“Do you think I’m a joke? Do you know who I am? I’m Karl Kastark, heir of the Northern—”

“Oh.”

The girl lightly clapped her hands and greeted him in a quiet voice.

“Hello.”

“...”

At that moment, Karl felt as though time had stopped.

She had greeted him.

She had finally acknowledged him.

A shy smile crept onto his face, and his cheeks flushed red.

“H-hello...”

He averted his gaze, stammering.

His emotions churned inside him, and his heart pounded in his chest.

“Mm.”

The girl gave a brief response before turning and walking away, as if their interaction was over.

Even so, Karl felt elated.

Her face and voice lingered in his mind even after he returned to his lodging.

He had fallen in love.

It was a love that could never be realized.

As the heir of the Kastark family, he was destined to marry Princess Iliana to secure an alliance between the North and the imperial family.

But his heart had already chosen her.

He couldn't control his feelings.

The more he tried to forget her, the deeper his emotions grew.

Eventually, Karl found himself stalking her, and at a subsequent banquet, he decided to confess his feelings.

“Um, Ariel, this is...”

Karl nervously presented her with the Kastark family's signet ring and slipped it onto her finger.

The girl looked at the ring with mild curiosity.

“If you wear this ring... you'll be treated with utmost respect

anywhere in the North....”

Karl mumbled, biting his lip.

He had planned to say something much more confident and charming, but his mind had gone blank in her presence.

“The, the stars are bright tonight,” Karl said awkwardly, looking up at the night sky to avoid her gaze.

“I’ll be leaving for the capital at dawn tomorrow. Anyway, thanks for accepting the ring. If you ever visit the North, I’ll... I’ll make sure you’re well cared for. It’s cold, but the scenery is beautiful, so....”

He rambled, unable to stop himself.

Frustrated, Karl steeled himself and turned to face her.

“So, Ariel, I—”

But before he could finish, the girl suddenly collapsed.

“Ariel...?”

Panicking, Karl checked to see if she was breathing.

She was, her breaths calm and steady, but she was unconscious.

Karl recalled the emergency training Shane had given him.

Artificial respiration....

His face flushed red, but he shook his head to clear the thought.

There was no time to hesitate.

“Alright!”

Karl closed his eyes tightly and leaned in.

But before his lips could touch hers, a cool sensation pressed against them.

“!”

Startled, Karl opened his eyes to see the girl staring back at him, her hand covering his mouth.

Her expression was unreadable.

“A-Ariel, this is....”

Before Karl could explain, someone behind him spoke.

“Karl, what exactly were you trying to do...?”

Though the misunderstanding was eventually cleared up, Karl never got to confess his feelings that day.

Now, standing before her once again, Karl felt his emotions well up.

“O-oh, it’s been so long....”

The Hero’s party watched from the side, but Karl didn’t care.

All he wanted was to embrace Ariel.

“It’s really been so long....”

But Ariel’s response was unexpected.

“Who?”

Chapter 137: Demon King's Army (11)

Ariel tilted her head and looked at Karl.

He seemed vaguely familiar, but she couldn't quite remember him.

Which wasn't surprising.

Her time with Karl had been fleeting, and since then, she'd encountered countless others.

It was only natural for Karl's face to fade from her memory.

Perhaps if he had done something memorable, like drawing the Hero's Sword, he would have left a stronger impression.

"Y-you don't remember me...?"

Karl's expression was stricken.

His gaze dropped to Ariel's hand, searching for the Kastark family's signet ring he had given her.

"!!"

But it wasn't there.

Instead, her finger bore a golden ring etched with a strange, unfamiliar symbol.

'Who gave her that...?' Karl thought, his mind racing.

"Greetings."

A voice interrupted his spiraling thoughts.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Prince Karl.”

It was Sion, the Hero.

Sion really *had* heard a lot about Karl—Princess Iliana frequently gossiped about him during her visits to the mansion to chat with Clara.

“And you’re just as handsome as they say.”

“ ... ”

Sion smiled brightly, but Karl’s expression hardened.

He understood instinctively.

This man.

The one who must have placed that golden ring on Ariel’s finger.

It seemed almost certain.

Sion, a former vagrant, had yet to receive a noble title despite being the Hero.

That explained why the ring lacked a family crest.

Karl scrutinized Sion’s face.

It wasn’t bad-looking, but it didn’t surpass his own.

So had Sion used his status as the Hero to win Ariel’s favor?

Grinding his teeth, Karl glared at Sion with barely concealed hostility, his expression so fierce it seemed he might strike at any moment.

“Hmm... for now...”

Shane, sensing the tension, spoke up.

He had already guessed Karl’s feelings and knew the situation needed to be diffused.

While Karl wouldn't dare create a scene, any conflict here would disrupt their preparations for the battle against the Demon King's army.

"It would be best to provide these guests with accommodations," Shane suggested.

He turned to a soldier nearby.

"Escort the Hero's party to their chambers."

Even after the Hero's party had left, Karl remained frozen in place.

Shane, too, stood silently, waiting for Karl to move.

Deep down, Shane felt a pang of guilt.

The Kastark family's signet ring that Karl had given Ariel...

Shane had secretly retrieved it and returned it to Grand Duke Kastark.

It had been an unavoidable decision.

He couldn't allow such an important family heirloom to remain in the hands of an elf girl.

"Young master," Shane said, placing a hand on Karl's shoulder.

Karl's body trembled slightly.

"Let's head inside. Tonight, we must host a banquet for the Hero's party. And tomorrow, we'll join forces to defeat the Demon King's army."

"I know, Sir Shane."

Karl nodded, his voice tinged with weariness.

He understood.

Now wasn't the time to let personal feelings get in the way.

It was just that the shock was too much for him to process.

“...Ariel wasn't wearing the ring I gave her,” Karl muttered.

“Hmm...”

“And she didn't seem to remember me. Or perhaps she was pretending, because the Hero was with her. That golden ring on her finger... he must have given it to her. They're probably lovers. Why else would Ariel come to the North with him? She's not even part of the Hero's party....”

“Hmm...”

Shane scratched his head.

It was natural that Ariel wasn't wearing the Kastark signet ring—Shane had taken it back.

As for her not remembering Karl...

That made sense, too.

From the start, Ariel hadn't shown much interest in Karl.

For her to forget him entirely was plausible.

“Sion, was it...? That boy must have used his status as the Hero to charm Ariel. Damn it....”

Karl clenched his fists in frustration.

Shane sighed softly.

He doubted that was the case.

From the brief interaction, Sion seemed somewhat naïve.

While he was about Karl's age, he gave off the impression of being much younger.

Could someone like him have really swayed Ariel with his title as Hero?

And even if he had, would Ariel, that stoic elf girl, have been

impressed?

"I'm not so sure. Let's observe them a little longer. For now, young master, you must focus on the Demon King's army."

"...Understood."

Karl nodded and finally began to move.

"But if..."

Shane hesitated before continuing.

"If there is something between that elf girl and the Hero..."

"I know, Sir Shane. I won't fight him."

Despite his words, Karl's eyes burned with determination.

"If I do fight him, it will be after we've defeated the Demon King's army."

"..."

The Hero's party was shown to two spacious rooms, separated by gender, with a shared common lounge in the center.

The lounge featured a large stone fireplace radiating warmth, surrounded by long sofas covered in bear pelts.

"Is it just me, or was that Karl guy acting a bit strange?" Sana said, plopping down on one of the sofas.

Liana nodded in agreement.

"He was definitely glaring at Sion with killing intent."

"Sion, did you do something to upset him?"

"No..."

Sion shrugged.

"I've never met him before."

"Hmm, really?"

Meanwhile, Levana was watching Ariel with a complicated expression.

Earlier...

Karl had seemed to recognize Ariel.

Was it possible that even the Northern Duke's heir knew her?

But Ariel hadn't recognized Karl.

"Ariel..."

Levana approached Ariel, who was busy arranging her dragon plushie, Sparky, on her bed.

"Have you met Prince Karl before?"

Ariel tilted her head, her expression uncertain.

"I'm not sure."

"Think carefully. It seemed like he knew you."

Ariel narrowed her eyes in thought.

After a moment, she spoke.

"I don't know."

"..."

"But I fought the knight standing behind him once."

"What?"

Levana's eyes widened in shock.

"You fought that knight?"

"Yes."

"And how is he still... I mean, why did you fight him?"

"He broke into my room. And... he asked for the ring back."

Ariel's face lit up with a faint realization.

"Oh."

She finally remembered who Karl was.

“He’s the one who put a ring on my finger.”

“W-w-what? Prince Karl did?”

“Yes.”

Levana’s expression turned to one of utter disbelief.

She knew all too well what it meant for a man to place a ring on a woman’s finger.

Her gaze shifted to the golden ring on Ariel’s hand.

“Is that the ring Karl gave you?”

Ariel shook her head.

“This is a golden lover’s ring from the giants.”

“Then the ring Karl gave you... the knight took it back when he broke into your room?”

“Yes.”

“...”

Levana began to piece things together.

Prince Karl must have given Ariel the signet ring as a gesture of affection, but the knight had retrieved it—likely without Karl’s knowledge.

He had even gone as far as to break into Ariel’s room to reclaim it.

It must have been for the sake of the family.

As the heir of the prestigious Kastark family, Karl was bound by duty.

Furthermore, Levana had heard rumors of an impending marriage between Karl and Princess Iliana.

If news of Karl gifting the ring to Ariel had spread, the marriage would have been jeopardized.

The knight’s actions made perfect sense.

In the end, the knight had succeeded in retrieving the ring, leaving Karl unaware.

Now, Karl was simply overjoyed to see Ariel again, unaware that she didn't even recognize him.

"But why was Karl so hostile toward Sir Sion?"

Levana furrowed her brow.

"They've never even met before...."

Her expression stiffened as a thought struck her.

"Could it be...?"

Her gaze fell on the golden ring on Ariel's hand.

"Does he think Sir Sion gave her that ring?"

Unintentionally, Levana had arrived at the truth.

"That would explain it... otherwise, there's no reason for Karl to be so antagonistic toward Sion...."

At that moment, something brushed against Levana's lips.

Looking down, she saw a macaron floating in midair.

"Ariel, this isn't the time to—"

Before she could finish, the macaron gently pressed against her lips, and she instinctively opened her mouth.

The macaron slipped inside, and Levana chewed thoughtfully.

"...This situation is serious, Ariel," she said, her voice muffled by the pastry.

Chapter 138: Demon King's Army (12)

The banquet to welcome the Hero's party began.

As the party entered the grand hall, the Northerners erupted into cheers and applause. Karl stood from his seat, raising his voice to address the crowd.

"Heroes and brave warriors of the North! Tonight, we gather here to unite our will and strength for the battle tomorrow!"

The hall grew silent as all eyes turned to Karl.

He continued, his tone steady and resolute.

"The Demon King's army, assembling in the North, is a formidable force. Leading them is one of the Four Generals, Skadi, Lord of Frost. The battle will be harsh, but we have our courageous Heroes and the indomitable spirit of the North!"

His speech was met with thunderous cheers.

"Hurrah!"

"Glory to the Heroes!"

"Glory to the North!"

Sion clenched his fist with determination, while Sana raised an eyebrow slightly.

Liana nodded solemnly, and Levana murmured a quiet prayer.

As for Ariel, her attention was fixed on the banquet spread at the center of the hall.

Roast meats dripping with juices, fragrant stews brimming with

spices, and fresh fruits were all displayed. But what captivated Ariel the most were the desserts.

Blueberry tarts, raspberry mousse, cakes drenched in maple syrup—and particularly, a pie adorned with white cream shaped like an eye. Ariel's eyes sparkled at the sight.

When Karl's speech ended, the atmosphere relaxed, and the feast began.

Alcohol was prohibited, given the battle ahead, but the Northerners provided their unique beverages as a substitute.

Ariel picked up a Northern drink and the eye-shaped pie, carrying them to her seat.

Sion was holding a plate piled with meat and vegetables, Sana was sampling a spicy stew, Liana had chosen fresh fruits, and Levana opted for simple bread.

However, the Hero's party couldn't fully enjoy their meal.

The Northerners began approaching them with questions.

Sion was inundated with inquiries about the Hero's Sword, Sana about her magic, and Levana about her healing abilities and divine miracles.

Liana, however, received a different kind of attention.

“What's your type?”

Liana had become the star of the banquet.

Being an elf made her stand out, but her balanced physique and strong presence captivated the Northern men.

Although the banquet wasn't a social gathering, the men couldn't help but approach her—albeit respectfully.

Meanwhile, someone else approached Ariel.

“I hope the food suits your taste.”

It was Karl.

Ariel looked up at him and greeted him with a simple, “Hello.”

She had remembered who Karl was after her earlier conversation with Levana.

Her memories of him weren't particularly significant—he had given her a ring and attempted artificial respiration, which she had blocked while half-asleep.

“Ah, hello,” Karl stammered, his cheeks flushing.

At the same time, he felt a twinge of bitterness.

Earlier, Ariel had acted like she didn't know him, yet now she acknowledged him, conveniently while Sion was surrounded by Northerners.

Was Sion really that important to her?

“The ring... suits you well,” Karl said, glancing at the golden ring on Ariel's finger.

It wasn't a subtle move, but Karl couldn't help himself.

He wanted to gauge Ariel's reaction.

“Thank you.”

Ariel smiled, gazing at the ring fondly.

To her, it brought back memories of the giants, Theodoras, and Lakia.

But to Karl, her reaction looked different.

Does she cherish it that much because of that Hero...?

Karl's heart ached.

He decided to ask a more direct question.

“Ariel, why are you traveling with the Hero’s party?”

If Ariel answered, “*Because I want to be with the Hero,*” Karl felt he might never recover.

Still, he wanted to hear her honest answer.

Her response, however, was vague.

“Just because.”

“J-just because...?”

To Ariel, it really was just because.

If there was a reason, it might have been to protect Levana, but even that wasn’t necessary—she could return to the Evergreen Forest and come whenever Levana summoned her.

Staying with the party wasn’t about purpose; she simply felt like it.

“Just because...” Karl murmured, repeating the words as he fell into deep contemplation.

Meanwhile, Ariel shoved the eye-shaped pie into her mouth.

Ignoring Karl’s muttering, she ate the pie, drank the Northern beverage, and moved on to the blueberry tart she had taken.

“Will you join us in the battle against the Demon King’s army tomorrow?” Karl asked.

Ariel nodded.

While she had no intention of interfering in the Hero’s party’s fight, she planned to accompany them in case Levana was endangered.

If anything happened, Theodoras wouldn’t stay silent.

“Then perhaps you should stay with me tomorrow,” Karl suggested. “The Hero’s party will be busy fighting, so they won’t be able to protect you.”

Karl knew of Ariel’s strength—he had seen her arm-wrestling and

throwing Corbin across the hall.

Still, he assumed her power was only marginally above average.

On a battlefield, she would need someone to shield her.

He wanted to be that person.

Normally, such a statement from Karl would have any noblewoman—or even Princess Iliana—blushing and agreeing immediately.

But Ariel wasn't like them.

Karl didn't let his guard down.

“For reference, I'll be riding a snow bear tomorrow. A massive one. It's no ordinary bear, more like a mystical creature—its fur is soft and plush. Just like that silver wolf you saw before.”

He dangled bait he thought Ariel might bite.

“It moves swiftly over snow and ice and understands my commands perfectly. If you'd like, I could let you ride it with me. What do you say?”

Ariel, chewing on her dessert, looked intrigued.

Encouraged, Karl glanced at her plate.

It was filled entirely with desserts.

“And tomorrow, I'll bring aurora jelly. Ever heard of it?”

“No.”

Karl smirked.

“On the brightest aurora nights, flowers bloom in the polar region, absorbing the aurora's light to create this jelly. It's incredibly rare—something even royals can't easily obtain. Its taste is unforgettable. If you stay with me tomorrow, you can try it.”

“...!”

Ariel's gaze changed.

She stared at Karl and spoke decisively.

"Let me stay with you tomorrow."

The giant snow bear and aurora jelly were temptations Ariel couldn't resist.

"Y-yes," Karl replied, avoiding her eyes.

Internally, he was celebrating.

Are you watching, Sion? Tomorrow, Ariel rides with me.

As he imagined the closeness of sharing the snow bear, Karl shook his head furiously.

No. No impure thoughts.

His feelings for Ariel were pure and noble.

Even if there was physical contact, it was incidental.

All he wanted was her heart, not her body.

Still, Karl couldn't contain his joy.

He bowed his head low, hiding the giddy smile spreading across his face.

Tomorrow was the decisive battle against the Demon King's army.

Lives would be lost, and the Northerners considered dying in battle an honor.

Even so, Karl didn't want to show such frivolity on this solemn night.

"Young master."

Shane approached Karl.

"Ah, Sir Shane. What is it?"

“There’s something I must tell you.”

Shane’s face was serious.

He had made his decision.

It was time to tell Karl the truth about retrieving the Kastark signet ring.

Shane knew Karl might resent him and lose trust in him, but he had no choice.

The truth would come out eventually.

When Shane had taken the ring, he never imagined Karl and Ariel would cross paths again.

But fate—or something—had brought them together once more.

Now, Karl was hurt, believing Ariel didn’t value the ring.

Shane couldn’t let it go on.

“What is it?” Karl asked, his mood unusually light.

For the first time in ages, he looked more like a cheerful boy than the stern heir of the North.

“Is it something you can’t say here?”

Shane nodded.

It would be better to discuss it in private.

“Understood, Sir Shane. Let’s move to a quieter place.”

Karl rose and walked with a light step.

Chapter 139: Demon King's Army (13)

Karl and Shane stood face-to-face near a quiet fountain outside the banquet hall.

No one else was around.

“Sir Shane, what is it you wish to tell me?” Karl asked.

Shane hesitated briefly before speaking.

“...In truth, I reclaimed the Kastark signet ring.”

“What?” Karl tilted his head.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. The Kastark signet ring you gave the elf girl in Sierra—I retrieved it that same day. The ring is now in the possession of Lord Kastark. He will return it to you when the time is right, such as when you propose to the princess....”

Shane trailed off, bowing his head.

“I apologize, my lord....”

Karl's eyes trembled as he stared at Shane.

His expression was a mixture of shock and betrayal.

After a long silence, Karl finally spoke, his voice unsteady.

“Why... why would you do that? That was a gift for Ariel....”

Shane met Karl's gaze steadily, his eyes resolute.

“It was for the family, my lord. A necessary decision for the family's sake.”

Karl's face twisted in anger.

“For the family... I see.”

He clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to control his emotions. "But did you think about Ariel's perspective? To give her the ring, only to take it back... have you considered how she might feel?"

Perhaps Ariel's cold demeanor earlier wasn't due to forgetfulness but anger.

Surely, she must have felt hurt—maybe even humiliated.

"She must have been deeply wounded. It's no wonder she would never want to see me again. How could she? I played with her feelings like it was some trivial game...."

Karl's hands curled into tight fists.

"I must apologize to her immediately."

He turned abruptly.

"And from now on...."

His voice wavered.

"...I'm not sure I can trust you anymore, Sir Shane."

Karl hurried back to the banquet hall, intent on apologizing to Ariel. He wanted to tell her it had all been a misunderstanding.

But he froze at the entrance.

Ariel was fast asleep.

And Sion was carrying her on his back.

"Let's get you to bed," Sion said gently as he walked off with Ariel.

Karl felt something crumble deep inside him.

He sank into a nearby chair.

His legs had given out; he couldn't stand any longer.

"Excuse me...."

A voice interrupted his spiraling thoughts.

It was Levana.

“Hello, Lord Karl.”

Karl didn’t respond.

“Thank you for hosting this banquet. It’s truly splendid.”

Still, Karl remained silent, his gaze unfocused.

In his mind, Sion’s words—“*Let’s get you to bed*”—kept replaying endlessly.

“Did you know?” Levana continued, unfazed.

“The ancient giants, thought to be extinct, are still alive.”

There was no reaction from Karl.

“In fact, Ariel discovered them. She received a gift from the giants—the golden ring she wears now. Did you notice it, Lord Karl? That golden ring on Ariel’s finger....”

After Karl and Shane had left the banquet, Ariel had quickly fallen asleep from food fatigue.

Levana had asked Sion to carry Ariel to her room.

Sion, eager to escape the slightly awkward banquet, had readily agreed.

Once Sion had left with Ariel, Levana had searched for Karl.

She wanted to clear up the misunderstanding.

From what she could tell, Karl’s hostility toward Sion stemmed from a false assumption.

Ariel wasn’t wearing the signet ring Karl had given her because Shane had taken it back.

But instead, Ariel wore a golden ring from the giants, which Karl seemed to think had come from Sion.

Levana wanted to explain everything.

“Lord Karl...?” Levana called again, her tone more urgent.

“Are you listening?”

“Ah.”

Finally, Karl snapped out of his daze and looked at her.

“My apologies, Saintess. What were you saying?”

“Ariel’s golden ring.”

“Ah, that ring.”

“It’s actually—”

“Levana!”

Before Levana could explain, someone hugged her from behind.

It was Sana.

“Let’s go back to our room!” Sana chirped.

“We should take another bath together tonight!”

“Ah, yes, Sana, just a moment....”

“What’s the problem? Don’t be shy! I can’t resist you when you’re all bashful—both you and Ariel, always covering your faces while we bathe....”

“Well, I suppose I should take my leave,” Karl said hastily, standing up with a flushed face.

“This golden ring, Lord Karl—” Levana tried again, but Karl was already making his escape.

Morning broke over the North.

Ariel woke quickly, putting her stuffed dragon Sparky and the figure of Urcanos back into her inventory.

She stepped into the attached bathroom for a quick shower before dressing.

“You’re up early, Ariel?” Levana asked groggily as she sat up in bed.

“Why so early?”

Levana rubbed her eyes as Ariel finished getting ready.

“I’m going to ride the snow bear today.”

“Snow bear?”

“They say it’s a mystical beast, like Ghost.”

“Sounds fun.”

“I’ll be off.”

“Wait, okay. See you later, Ariel.”

Ariel strode out of the room with purpose, and Levana stretched before starting her own preparations.

After a bath and donning her priestess robes, Levana knelt in prayer.

Today marked the day of their battle against the Demon King’s army.

Levana prayed for the safety of everyone involved and the defeat of the enemy with minimal casualties.

By the time she was done, Sana and Liana were waking up, and Levana went to rouse Sion.

“Sir Sion, it’s—”

“Ah!”

Sion bolted upright, flinging off his blanket.

He was already fully armored, having slept in his gear.

“Let’s go defeat the Demon King’s army!”

Levana smiled softly.

“Let’s do it.”

Meanwhile, Ariel was in the castle courtyard, facing off against the snow bear.

Or rather, the snow bear was glaring at her, baring its teeth.

Ariel, however, simply looked at it and thought it resembled a giant cotton ball.

“Isn’t it amazing, Ariel?” Karl asked proudly.

The bear had been a gift from his father last year.

As a mystical beast, it was massive, intelligent, and fiercely loyal to Karl.

“What’s its name?” Ariel asked.

“Its name?” Karl faltered.

“I never gave it one... does it need a name?”

“It should have one.”

“Really? Then would you... would you like to name it, Ariel?”

The bear’s expression stiffened as if betrayed.

Without hesitation, Ariel said, “Ted.”

“T-Ted?”

“Yes.”

Incidentally, the bear was female.

“Ted sounds perfect,” Ariel declared.

Karl, beaming, nodded eagerly.

“Alright. Ted it is.”

Ted looked at Karl, who was smiling foolishly as he agreed with Ariel.

To the bear, he seemed utterly pathetic.

“I want to pet it,” Ariel said, stepping toward Ted.

Karl quickly grabbed her arm.

“You can’t. Ted is vicious with anyone but me. Maybe later, when I’m riding—”

But Ariel ignored him and continued walking.

“A-Ariel, it’s dangerous!” Karl shouted as Ted lunged at Ariel.

“Grrraah!”

Ted’s roar echoed through the courtyard.

Ted was well-known in Kastark Castle for her ferocity.

The massive beast was usually restrained with thick iron chains, and even the bravest Northern warriors avoided her reach.

But now, Ariel had walked straight into Ted's range without hesitation.

"Grrraah!"

Already upset about the strange name, Ted charged at Ariel furiously.

But.

Thwack!

With a sharp snap, Ted's enormous body was sent flying backward.

She crashed into the wall and staggered, dazed.

Ariel had flicked her finger against Ted's snout.

Tears welled in Ted's eyes, but so did her rage.

"Grrraah!!"

She charged again.

Thwack!

The result was the same.

Each time Ted lunged, Ariel flicked her away effortlessly.

Eventually, Ted collapsed, too exhausted to move.

Ariel approached the defeated bear with an impassive expression.

Ted shut her eyes tightly and curled up, bracing for more pain.

But instead, Ariel murmured softly,

"Heal."

A gentle white light enveloped Ted, soothing her injuries.

Ted opened her eyes to find Ariel extending a hand toward her.

Ted stared at the hand for a moment before slowly pressing her face against it.

Chapter 140: Demon King's Army (14)

This is absurd.

Karl couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Ted, the colossal snow bear who never tolerated anyone but him, was now lying on her back, wagging her paws in the air while Ariel scratched her belly. She even nuzzled Ariel's hand affectionately, something Karl had never seen her do.

What is happening?

When Ariel first approached Ted, Karl was terrified.

He had tried to pull Ariel back, but her strength was immovable. Karl had shouted, pleaded, and even physically tried to block her path, but Ariel strode calmly into Ted's territory.

Ted had snarled and charged, her claws poised to tear through Ariel.

Karl had almost leapt in front of the bear, ready to shield Ariel with his own body.

But Ariel had simply flicked Ted's snout with her finger.

Thwack!

Ted flew through the air and crashed into a wall.

Karl stood frozen, his jaw slack.

Did that just happen?

It wasn't a fluke. Ted charged again and again, but each time, Ariel

flicked her snout, sending her flying back like a ragdoll.

Eventually, Ted collapsed from exhaustion.

What shocked Karl even more was that Ariel knelt beside the defeated bear and cast a healing spell.

Healing magic?

Was Ariel secretly a cleric?

Ted, now fully healed, whimpered as Ariel extended a hand. Slowly, the once-mighty snow bear pressed her snout into Ariel's palm.

From that moment, Ted was utterly submissive.

Now Ariel was burying her face in Ted's thick fur while the massive bear licked her cheek like a playful puppy.

Karl couldn't help but laugh, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Ariel," he called, approaching with a small object in hand.

It was a piece of Aurora Jelly, the rare and dazzling treat he had mentioned the previous night.

"This is what I was talking about yesterday—"

Before he could finish, Ariel snatched the jelly with lightning speed.

She broke it in half and offered a piece to Ted, who gulped it down happily. Ariel popped the other half into her mouth, her expression lighting up.

"...Amazing," she murmured, clearly moved by the taste.

A trumpet blared, and the gates of Kastark Castle creaked open.

The Hero's Party, mounted on their horses, led the charge.

Behind them marched the northern warriors, their weapons glinting in the pale morning light.

Today, humanity's forces would confront the Demon King's Army on the frozen plains of Luwin.

At the forefront, the Hero's Party wore grim expressions. Their mission was clear: eliminate Skadi, the Frostlord, one of the Demon King's four generals.

While the northern warriors held back the main force, the Hero's Party would carve a path to Skadi and strike her down. Without their leader, the undead army she commanded—known as the Frostbound—would falter.

"Frostbound... never seen them before. Are they strong?" Sana asked.

Levana nodded.

"They're powerful, according to records. Their bodies emit intense cold that can freeze your skin on contact. And they're undead—they don't tire or feel pain."

The Frostbound were vulnerable to fire and holy magic.

This made Sana's fire spells and Levana's divine magic crucial in the coming fight.

But no matter how many Frostbound they destroyed, Skadi could summon more. Prolonging the battle would only exhaust their resources.

The only solution was to defeat Skadi swiftly.

"The Demon King's Army in the north is no joke," Sion said, his voice steady.

"Besides Skadi, we'll have to contend with Katrina's vampire legion and Helsphon's beast army. Once we've dealt with Skadi, we'll join the northern warriors to finish the rest."

Katrina, the Vampire Lord, and Helsphon, the Beastmaster, were notorious rivals. Their uneasy alliance existed solely because of Skadi's iron command.

Northern strategists believed that once Skadi fell, the alliance would dissolve into infighting, making the Demon King's Army far easier to

handle.

Soon, the icy expanse of the Luwin Plains came into view.

The barren, frostbitten landscape stretched out endlessly, its harsh winds stinging their faces.

In the distance, the Demon King's Army awaited, a sea of dark figures bristling with malice.

Karl raised his voice, his youthful tone carrying the weight of northern resolve.

"Warriors of the north!" he called, his voice echoing over the army.

"Today, we will write a new chapter in our history! Here, on the blood-soaked plains of our ancestors, we will end the threat of the Demon King's Army once and for all!"

Karl drew his sword high into the air.

"Our blades are forged with the light of justice! Our shields are the bastion of hope! Fear not! With the Hero's Party at our side, this land shall bear witness to our victory!"

The northern warriors roared in response, their morale soaring.

"Heroes and warriors alike!" Karl shouted. "Show them our strength! For freedom! For peace! Advance!"

As Karl's cry rang out, thousands of weapons were raised high.

The Luwin Plains trembled with the sound of their war cry as they surged forward to meet the enemy.

"What's with that kid?" Katrina, the Vampire Lord, sneered, her crimson eyes fixed on Karl.

"He's quite the looker, isn't he?"

She turned to Helsphon, who loomed beside her like a hulking shadow.

“Don’t touch him. That boy is mine,” Katrina purred, licking her lips.

Helsphon’s grotesque face twisted in what might have been a smile. “Take him if you want. But the silver-haired elf riding behind him is mine. She’s exactly my type.”

“Disgusting,” Katrina muttered.

“Shut it, bloodsucker,” Helsphon growled.

From their vantage point, they watched the Hero’s Party leading the charge.

“Looks like they’re headed straight for Skadi,” Helsphon said, his voice rumbling with amusement.

“How predictable,” Katrina replied.

“Skadi already predicted this. She’s set up traps.”

“Let’s see how those little heroes handle it,” Helsphon said with a dark chuckle.

“Maybe they’ll cry,” Katrina teased.

“They’re just kids, after all.”

Both stood, ready to intercept the human forces.

“It’s been far too long since I’ve tasted human blood,” Katrina mused, stretching languidly.

Helsphon grinned, his claws flexing.

“And I’m starving.”

The human army collided with the Demon King’s Army on the Luwin Plains.

Northern warriors roared as they swung their swords, cutting through undead flesh. Katrina’s vampires and Helsphon’s beasts retaliated viciously, their attacks savage and unrelenting.

The air rang with the clash of steel and the cries of battle.

In the midst of the chaos, the Hero’s Party raced toward Skadi’s position.

Sana's fire spells turned Frostbound into ash, while Levana's holy magic purified the undead, leaving only smoldering remains.

Liana rained down precise arrows from the rear, covering their advance, while Sion led the charge, his sword glowing with golden light.

“Judgment of the Sun!”

Sion's attack carved a blazing path through the enemy lines.

“Hold on, Skadi!” he yelled, his voice brimming with determination.
“We're coming for you!”

In the distance, Skadi sat upon her frozen throne, a chilling smile on her lips.

“Fools,” she muttered.

She had been waiting for this moment.

Chapter 141: Demon King's Army (15)

Karl's heart raced as he guided Ted up the treacherous slopes of the Silverwind Mountains. Behind him, Ariel sat calmly, her hands lightly resting on his waist. Despite the biting winds and the gravity of the situation, Karl found it nearly impossible to focus. Ariel's presence, the subtle scent she carried, and her serene demeanor were utterly disarming.

Focus, Karl. This is a war.

He tightened his grip on Ted's reins and forced his gaze forward, toward the swirling snow ahead. His people were risking their lives to buy him time. He couldn't afford to falter.

Meanwhile, at the base of the Silverwind Mountains, Katrina and Helsphon faced the northern vanguard, led by Shane.

Katrina's crimson eyes gleamed as she surveyed the warriors before her. Her blood magic had already decimated lesser soldiers, and she looked forward to draining these stronger opponents dry.

"You've got guts standing in my way," Katrina said with a smirk, her fingers glowing with a sinister red light.

Next to her, Helsphon grunted in agreement, his massive form blocking out the dim sunlight. His recently severed horn dripped with black ichor, and his eyes burned with rage.

"I'll crush the one who dared to touch my horn," he growled, his voice rumbling like thunder.

Shane stepped forward, his silver sword glinting in the pale light. His expression was calm but resolute.

“For the North,” he said simply.

“For the North!” the warriors behind him echoed, raising their weapons.

The tension reached a boiling point as the two sides prepared to clash.

But just before the first blow could land, a figure dropped between them.

All eyes turned to the newcomer.

Ariel stood nonchalantly, her silver hair catching the light as it fluttered in the wind. She seemed utterly unfazed by the looming figures of Katrina and Helsphon or the tension surrounding her.

She raised a hand and extended it to her side.

With a low rumble, a portal tore open in the air beside her.

Out stepped a towering figure, easily over two meters tall.

The man was clad only in a crude grass skirt, his bronze skin glistening in the frigid air as if the cold had no effect on him. He carried a massive, gnarled club in one hand and a circular shield in the other. Despite his primitive appearance, his piercing eyes and confident smirk exuded an intimidating aura of power.

The northern warriors and even the Demon King’s generals froze, their gazes fixed on the mysterious giant.

“Who’s the newcomer?” Katrina asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Another of the hero’s entourage?” Helsphon muttered.

Ariel didn’t bother answering. She took another bite of her Aurora Jelly, chewing thoughtfully as she glanced at the man she had summoned.

The giant scanned his surroundings, his smirk growing wider as he

took in the scene. He stretched, rolling his shoulders with loud cracks, and stomped forward, his bare feet leaving deep impressions in the snow.

“Are these the ones bothering you, little elf?” he asked in a deep, resonant voice, turning his head to look down at Ariel.

Ariel nodded once, still chewing her jelly.

The giant let out a booming laugh.

“Understood. Then allow me to handle this.”

Katrina frowned, her lips curling in disdain.

“Do you seriously think some shirtless brute can stop us?”

Helsphon snorted, cracking his knuckles.

“I’ll tear him apart.”

The giant raised his club and pointed it at the two generals.

“You can try,” he said, his voice thick with amusement.

“But I’ve crushed boulders bigger than you. Let’s see how you fare against Thane of the Giants!”

The tension reignited as Thane charged forward, his massive club raised high.

Katrina reacted first, unleashing a wave of blood magic. The crimson mist shot toward Thane like a swarm of venomous snakes, hissing as it approached.

With a roar, Thane swung his club, dispersing the mist with a single, powerful blow.

Helsphon lunged at the same moment, his fists crashing down toward Thane like a falling mountain.

Thane raised his shield, and the impact sent a shockwave through the air. The ground beneath them cracked and splintered, but Thane stood firm, his feet planted solidly in the snow.

The northern warriors could only watch in awe as the three giants

clashed.

Shane took a step forward, his sword ready, but Ariel raised a hand to stop him.

“He’s got this,” she said simply.

Meanwhile, far above the battlefield, Karl and Ted continued their ascent into the heart of the Silverwind Mountains. The biting wind howled around them, and visibility was nearly zero.

Karl’s thoughts kept drifting to the brave warriors he had left behind. He clenched his jaw, forcing himself to focus.

They knew the risks. They trusted me to see this through.

As they crested a ridge, the wind suddenly died down, and the world opened up before them.

A vast expanse of frozen tundra stretched out, glittering under the faint light of the sun. At its center stood a massive fortress of ice, its spires reaching into the heavens.

The lair of the Frostlord, Skadi.

A low growl from Ted brought Karl back to the present. He glanced over his shoulder at Ariel, who had remained silent throughout their journey.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

Ariel nodded, her expression calm as ever.

Karl turned back to face the fortress, gripping his sword tightly.

“For the North,” he murmured, urging Ted forward toward their final confrontation.

Chapter 142: Demon King's Army (16)

The Frostlord, Skadi, sat regally on her frozen throne, a smirk playing on her pale lips. She gazed down at the Hero's Party, her icy eyes glinting with malice.

The icy cavern seemed to hum with power, frost creeping further along the walls as Skadi leaned forward.

"Welcome," she said, her voice echoing with an otherworldly chill. "You've saved me the trouble of hunting you down. How thoughtful."

Shion stepped forward, gripping the Hero's Sword tightly. "Your reign of terror ends here, Skadi!"

Skadi laughed, the sound sharp and cutting like shards of ice. "You think you can challenge me, boy? Foolish mortals."

The ground beneath the party began to shake. Cracks formed in the icy floor, and from them, blue flames erupted, encircling the group.

"Prepare yourselves," Skadi hissed, rising from her throne. Her aura intensified, and the air grew colder with each passing second.

Ariel, standing calmly at the rear of the group, watched the scene unfold with mild interest. The frost-covered walls and Skadi's theatrics failed to impress her. She tilted her head, her silver hair catching the dim light.

"Skadi," Ariel murmured, her tone even and unbothered.

The Frostlord's sharp gaze snapped to Ariel. For a moment, her confident smirk faltered as she took in the unassuming elf.

“And who are you?” Skadi sneered. “A child playing at war?”

Ariel didn’t respond immediately. She turned her head slightly and spoke to Shion, her voice calm.

“Take care of the minions. I’ll handle her.”

The entire party froze.

“What?” Shion blurted.

“Handle her?” Sena asked, her brow furrowing.

Even Skadi was taken aback by the casual declaration. But her surprise quickly turned to anger.

“You? Handle me?” Skadi hissed, her voice echoing dangerously. Frost formed on the ground around her feet.

Ariel gave a small shrug, then raised her hand.

The cavern trembled violently as Ariel summoned her mana. A dazzling light enveloped her form, and the frost Skadi had summoned began to crack and melt under the sheer pressure of her energy.

Skadi’s eyes widened in shock.

“What... what is this power?”

Ariel’s calm demeanor didn’t waver. She stepped forward, each of her footsteps sending ripples of power through the icy floor.

“Skadi,” Ariel said quietly, her gaze locking onto the Frostlord’s.

“You’ve ruled long enough.”

The air in the cavern shifted. A tremendous wave of energy surged outward from Ariel, sweeping over the entire area. Frost turned to steam, and the icy throne cracked and shattered behind Skadi.

“No!” Skadi snarled, her hands glowing with icy blue energy. “I won’t be defeated by some child!”

She raised her arms, summoning a massive glacier from the ground. It hurtled toward Ariel with devastating speed.

Ariel didn't flinch. She raised a hand, and the glacier stopped mid-air, disintegrating into harmless flakes of snow.

Skadi's face contorted with rage.

"This is impossible!"

Ariel tilted her head slightly, as if pondering something. Then, with a flick of her wrist, she sent a pulse of mana surging toward Skadi. The Frostlord barely had time to react as the force struck her, sending her crashing into the icy wall behind her throne.

The Frostlord struggled to her feet, blood trickling from her lips. Her once-imposing presence had diminished, and fear flickered in her eyes.

"How..." Skadi muttered, her voice trembling. "How can this be...?"

Ariel approached slowly, her expression unreadable. She stopped a few paces away from Skadi and raised her hand once more.

"Goodbye," Ariel said simply.

With a final surge of mana, Ariel unleashed a beam of concentrated energy. The light consumed Skadi, her screams echoing briefly before fading into silence.

When the light dissipated, the Frostlord was gone. Only a faint wisp of frost remained, drifting into the air.

The Hero's Party stood in stunned silence, their weapons lowered. The cavern, once an icy fortress, now seemed strangely warm, the frost having melted away entirely.

Shion was the first to speak, his voice tinged with disbelief.

"She... she actually did it."

Sena crossed her arms, frowning slightly.

"Well, I guess we didn't need to do anything after all."

Ariel turned to face the group, her expression as calm as ever.

“Let’s go,” she said simply.

As she walked past, Shion hesitated before falling in step behind her.

“Um, Ariel... just who are you?”

Ariel didn’t answer immediately. She glanced over her shoulder, her silver eyes glinting with an enigmatic light.

“A friend,” she said softly.

And with that, the party left the cavern, the echoes of Skadi’s defeat fading behind them.

Chapter 143: Demon King's Army (17)

Skadi sat atop her icy throne, gazing down at the Hero's Party from her lofty perch in the cavern.

Her eyes glowed with a cold, icy blue, exuding an aura of pure frost and merciless power.

Skadi, the Lord of Frost.

One of the four Great Generals trusted by the Demon Lord, and once a nightmare of battlefields across the continent.

In her hand, she held the massive spear known as *Niberion*, a magical weapon capable of changing size at will and unleashing devastating cold. Even a single swing through the air could freeze countless foes solid.

"How disappointing," she sneered. "These children dare call themselves a Hero's Party? Compared to the champions of old, you're utterly pathetic, laughable even."

Skadi had fought against humanity before in a past war.

Though her memories of it had grown hazy with time, the overwhelming might of Hero Leonhardt and the holy power of Saint Christina remained vividly etched in her mind.

The Hero's Party of old had been a dire threat to the Demon Lord's Army, which was part of the reason for this war being rushed.

The Demon Lord, despite his forces still recovering, had decided to launch the invasion before the current Hero had fully matured.

Once the Hero reached their prime, they would become nearly impossible to defeat.

“Perhaps we were too hasty...”

To Skadi, this Hero’s Party seemed far too unprepared.

Even if they were given a few more years to grow, they would pose no significant threat to the Demon Lord’s Army.

“Sometimes I think the Demon Lord worries too much...”

Rising from her throne, Skadi’s entire form radiated frost.

Her body was encased in gleaming silver armor, with white mist seeping from the joints.

Her face was hidden beneath a silver helmet, and crystalline wings of ice stretched from her back.

With *Niberion* in hand, she embodied the majesty and dread fitting of the title “Lord of Frost.”

“Well, let’s begin,” she declared, swinging *Niberion*.

“This place will become your icy tomb.”

The spear unleashed a wave of intense frost, surging toward the Hero’s Party.

“!!”

Sena and Levana quickly cast protective magic.

Shimmering blue and white barriers enveloped the Hero’s Party as Skadi’s frost collided with their defenses.

Boom!

The sheer force of the impact sent shockwaves through the cavern, and both Sena and Levana realized how powerful Skadi truly was.

Blocking just one attack had drained them of a significant amount of mana and divine energy.

But Skadi's onslaught was far from over.

The surrounding ice rapidly expanded, forming jagged shapes that splintered apart.

Crack! Crack!

From the fractures emerged skeletal figures with glowing blue eyes.

Frost Wraiths.

They rushed at the Hero's Party, their numbers seemingly endless.

"Judgment of the Sun!!"

Shion swung *Excalibur*, releasing golden waves of light.

"Inferno Blast!"

Sena conjured a fiery surge that roared through the wraiths.

"Divine Judgment!"

Levana called down a bolt of holy lightning, striking the icy undead.

Meanwhile, Riana loosed arrow after arrow, each one infused with mana, providing critical support.

Watching from above, Skadi chuckled coldly.

"Pathetic."

To her, the Hero's Party was laughable.

They were struggling against mere Frost Wraiths, creatures that should have been trivial for a true Hero's Party.

She found their efforts amusing, almost endearing.

If Leonhardt or Christina were here, they would have effortlessly

obliterated the wraiths with a wave of their hand and broken through Skadi's defenses to grab her by the throat.

“...”

Skadi frowned, shaking her head to dispel unpleasant memories.

“Damn it, they just keep coming!” Shion shouted.

“I'm almost out of mana!” Sena added, her voice trembling.

“Hold on...” Levana murmured, gritting her teeth.

Despite their best efforts, for every wraith they destroyed, more seemed to rise from the ice.

Skadi's strategy was working perfectly.

Her plan was to exhaust the Hero's Party by overwhelming them with Frost Wraiths before finishing them off herself.

In this frozen cavern, where the entrance was completely sealed, no reinforcements would arrive to save them.

“Already exhausted?” Skadi smirked, descending from her throne to approach the struggling party.

“You're so weak, it's almost boring.”

“Shut up!”

Shion suddenly yelled, his voice filled with anger.

“It's not the past anymore!”

“...What?”

Skadi's glowing eyes fixed on him, seemingly taken aback.

“The past is gone! This is our time! We'll defeat you, just like the Heroes of old did!”

“Is that so?”

Skadi raised *Niberion*, her voice dripping with mockery.

“Let’s see how you handle this.”

She swung the spear again, unleashing another torrent of icy death.

The frost surged toward them with even greater intensity.

Sena and Levana desperately tried to shield the party, but their depleted reserves couldn’t hold.

Boom!

The frost shattered their barriers and engulfed the party.

“Argh!!”

Shion’s scream echoed as his body was encased in ice.

Excalibur fell from his hand, its golden glow extinguished.

The rest of the party fared no better. Frost crept over their bodies, leaving them immobile and shivering on the ground.

Skadi approached Shion, the Frost Wraiths halting their assault at her command.

“Say it again,” she taunted, leaning down toward the frozen Hero.

“What did you call yourself?”

“I... I’m a Hero...” Shion choked out.

“No, you’re not,” Skadi sneered. “You’re a child playing at being a Hero. Look at your comrades—your weakness is the reason they’re dying. Soon, the North will fall, and the Empire will kneel before the Demon Lord’s Army. All because you were too weak to stop me. And you call yourself a Hero?”

Tears welled in Shion’s eyes, freezing as they fell.

“She’s right...” he thought bitterly. “I’m not a Hero... I’m just a pretender...”

“Crying now?” Skadi mocked. “You’re pathetic.”

“*Sacred Dispel!*”

Suddenly, a radiant wave of light burst forth from Levana, melting the frost encasing Shion.

Warmth flooded back into his body, and *Excalibur* reignited with golden brilliance.

Shion grabbed the sword, his grip steady as he rose to his feet.

“*Solar Burst Slash!!*”

He swung the blade, unleashing a blinding wave of light that tore through the Frost Wraiths and slammed into Skadi.

The cavern quaked as she was thrown against the wall, her armor cracking under the assault.

As Shion stepped forward, his sword burning like the sun, he spoke firmly.

“You don’t have to be chosen to be a Hero. It’s about fighting for the things you care about. That’s what makes you one.”

A crack appeared in Skadi’s armor as his words reached her.

“Stop...” she murmured, trembling. “Stop saying those things. I don’t like it...”

The armor crumbled away, revealing a fragile figure—a young girl with pale blue hair and rabbit-like ears.

[That is Skadi’s true form, Shion,] *Excalibur* whispered in his mind.

Chapter 144: Demon Lord's Army (18)

Skadi's true identity was revealed to be that of a beastkin.

Beastkin were a race that retained the appearance of children and animal-like features, such as ears on their heads, and did not grow beyond their youthful form.

Once, the beastkin lived harmoniously with humans, largely due to their naturally endearing appearance.

Humans found beastkin irresistibly cute, and the beastkin, in turn, warmed to humans who treated them affectionately.

But over time, this relationship soured.

Humans became possessive of the beastkin, treating them as property. They placed collars around their necks to prevent them from returning to the forests and resorted to violence when their "pets" disobeyed.

Eventually, beastkin were graded and sold as slaves. Skadi was no exception, purchased for an exorbitant price by an elderly noblewoman.

This woman initially treated Skadi kindly.

Although she collared Skadi, she provided good food, refrained from hitting her, and often took her on walks.

One day, however, while walking with her mistress, Skadi saw the forest and, overcome with instinct, bolted forward, pulling her mistress down and injuring her severely.

“How dare you try to run away!”

Though Skadi had acted on an uncontrollable impulse, the noblewoman accused her of trying to escape and flew into a rage.

From that day, the abuse began.

Skadi was starved, beaten, and denied her beloved walks.

Fearing further attempts to escape, the woman locked Skadi in her mansion’s basement.

For beastkin, who thrived on freedom and the outdoors, being confined to one space caused immense stress, often leading to an early death.

Many captured beastkin died in this manner, but the humans didn’t care.

To them, buying a new one was easier than caring for the old.

And so, the beastkin population dwindled rapidly.

The rarer they became, the more valuable they were, driving humans to hunt them even more fervently.

It was a vicious cycle.

This dark history explained why beastkin were almost extinct on the continent.

Locked in the mansion’s basement, Skadi was no exception.

In frustration and despair, she banged her head against the walls.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

“Let me out!!”

Her forehead was red and swollen, but she didn’t stop.

She couldn’t stop. If she did, she feared she’d lose her mind.

“Let me out, please!!”

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Eventually, Skadi collapsed, drained of all strength.

Her vision blurred, and her breathing grew shallow.

She hadn’t had a sip of water in days.

Death felt imminent.

“Please... let me out...”

As her eyes began to close, she heard the creak of the basement door opening.

Skadi weakly turned her gaze toward the source of the sound.

Standing there was a girl with elegant black hair and a delicate face.

Skadi’s eyes widened as she noticed the object in the girl’s hand.

It was the severed head of the noblewoman who had imprisoned her.

The neck was cleanly cut, as if by a sharp blade, and blood still dripped from it.

“You poor thing.”

The girl approached Skadi slowly.

“Would you like to come with me?”

Skadi tried to shake her head.

She thought the girl was human and despised humans.

But then,

“If you come with me, I will give you power.”

Up close, Skadi realized the girl was not human.

She had horns protruding from her head.

“Power strong enough to take revenge on those humans who did this to you.”

Shion stared at Skadi in disbelief.

One of the four Great Generals trusted by the Demon Lord.

The Lord of Frost, feared as a nightmare of the battlefield.

“...Is that *her*?”

No matter how he looked at her, Skadi appeared to be nothing more than a child.

A cute child with rabbit-like ears, at that.

Shion wasn't the only one who thought so.

Sena, Levana, and Riana all wore softened expressions as they gazed at Skadi.

“She's adorable.”

Sena finally blurted out, and Skadi's face contorted in fury.

“How dare you say such a thing to me!”

Skadi glared at Sena with all her might, but it backfired.

Her angry expression only made her look more endearing, drawing smiles from everyone present.

This was Skadi's least favorite reaction.

Fuming, she grabbed *Niberion* from the ground and declared,

“You insolent fools! This place will be your icy tomb—”

“Now that I think about it,” Shion interrupted.

“It’s not us who are the rookies here. It’s you.”

Skadi’s rabbit ears twitched.

“W-What...?”

“I almost fell for it,” Shion continued. “Who would’ve thought such a little kid was hiding inside that giant silver armor?”

“Take that back,” Skadi said, trembling.

“Take back what you just said. Or else...”

Niberion began to glow an intense blue in her hands.

“I’ll never forgive you!”

Her high-pitched voice echoed through the ice cavern.

Long ago, Skadi had been taken in by the Demon Lord and granted a special power: the Authority of Frost.

This ability allowed her to wield cold at will and control Frost Wraiths.

With this power, she had risen to the rank of Great General, a position she took immense pride in.

What Skadi didn’t know was that the Demon Lord had chosen her more because he found her charming than for her capabilities.

Regardless, Skadi worked hard to project authority.

She adopted a stern demeanor and a commanding way of speaking.

But it hadn’t helped.

She overheard whispers from others:

“Did you see her in today’s meeting? That beastkin girl?”

“Oh! The rookie? She’s just too cute!”

“I know, right? I just want to hug her!”

“And stroke those ears while she sits on my lap!”

“Brilliant idea!”

Though they tried to whisper discreetly, Skadi’s rabbit ears caught everything.

Perhaps that was when she decided to craft and wear the massive silver armor.

Even the Demon Lord had lamented this decision but couldn’t change her mind.

Eventually, he tried to bribe her.

“If you don’t wear the armor when we’re alone, I’ll give you this magical spear.”

Reluctantly, Skadi had agreed, and *Niberion* became hers.

Now, she glared fiercely at Shion, brandishing the weapon.

“Take back what you said!”

Her voice reverberated through the cavern as *Niberion* glowed threateningly.

“No.”

Shion shook his head firmly.

Whether he took it back or not didn’t matter.

Skadi was still an enemy he had to defeat.

And the upper hand was his now.

Skadi’s armor was broken, and her Frost Wraiths were gone.

“You’re just a rookie.”

With those words, Shion swung *Excalibur*, releasing another golden wave of energy.

Skadi slammed *Niberion* into the ground, creating an ice barrier.

Boom!

The golden wave shattered her barrier effortlessly.

“...?”

But Skadi was gone.

She had retreated to a higher point in the cavern, glaring down at Shion.

“Rise, my Frost Wraiths!”

At her command, hundreds of Frost Wraiths emerged from the ice.

Shion ignored them, launching himself toward Skadi.

Fighting her minions would only waste time. He needed to eliminate her directly to end the fight.

His companions had regained their strength and were ready to fight.

“Cover me!” Shion shouted. “I’ll take her down!”

While his friends engaged the Wraiths, Shion charged at Skadi.

“Foolish,” Skadi sneered, raising *Niberion*.

“Blizzard Storm!”

The cavern filled with a roaring tempest of frost, engulfing Shion completely.

Chapter 145: Demon Lord's Army (19)

Shion had been training relentlessly ever since he drew the hero's sword.

To become stronger.

To be recognized as a true hero.

He woke before dawn each day to build his endurance and spent late nights honing his swordsmanship.

Eventually, his efforts bore fruit.

Despite not being chosen as a hero and lacking extraordinary talent, Shion achieved remarkable results through sheer determination.

Likewise, Skadi had also worked tirelessly.

She trained every day to master the Frost Authority granted to her by the Demon Lord.

To grow stronger.

To earn recognition within the Demon Lord's army.

In this, Shion and Skadi shared similarities.

The key difference was,

"I am a being who has lived for centuries. A mere human has no right to call me a rookie!"

The difference was the overwhelming gap in time.

Whoosh!

The frost storm unleashed by Skadi engulfed Shion, encasing him in a massive block of ice that plummeted to the ground.

If it struck the floor, the ice would shatter, and his body would be torn to pieces.

“Die, human!”

Skadi’s gaze remained fixed on the falling Shion.
Yet her mind wandered to someone else entirely.

Back when humans and beastkin had coexisted peacefully, there had been a man who doted on her.
He would meet her in the forest, bring her delicious food, and affectionately pat her head.

But he was also the one who had eventually betrayed her, selling her to a noble family.

“Humans are all the same.”

Skadi’s voice was cold as she closed her eyes.

Soon, Shion’s body would crash to the floor and shatter into pieces.
The sound of sharp, terrible destruction would echo.
His comrades would scream in anguish.
A scene of utter devastation would unfold.

Skadi opened her eyes again.
She would not look away.
She would not cover her ears.
She would face the sight and sounds of a human’s death head-on.
With an indifferent expression.
As if it were nothing at all.
Just as that man had done when he sold her off.

Whoosh!

Then, someone moved.

It was the elf warrior, Riana.

She sprinted toward the spot where Shion was falling and caught him as he landed.

Thud!

Well, more accurately, she was crushed beneath him.

“.....”

“Riana!”

“Riana, are you okay?!”

The mage Sena and the saintess Levana hurried over to her.

“...I-I’m fine. Just... can’t feel my back,” Riana groaned, her face twisted in pain.

Thanks to her, Shion had survived.

Levana quickly cast holy magic to heal Riana and free Shion from the ice.

Skadi, hovering above, stared blankly at the scene.

“P-pathetic fools. Struggling won’t change anything... It’s all pointless....”

With a wave of Skadi’s hand, the Frost Wraiths began to move again. Hundreds of them surrounded the Hero’s Party.

“.....”

The party’s expressions darkened.

They had neither the strength nor the will left to fight.

If they focused on the Wraiths, Skadi would strike from above. If they focused on Skadi, her devastating frost storm made them hesitate.

Her storm had frozen Shion solid in an instant.

Even Skadi’s face was not without its shadows.

For some reason, she felt unsettled.

She’d often felt this way during past battles.

Whenever the moment came to kill a human, an inexplicable weight pressed on her chest.

It was worse when she saw humans clinging to life, relying on each

other.

Was it guilt?
Or envy?
She couldn't tell.

But none of that mattered now.

It was time to finish this.

Skadi hardened her expression and prepared to command the Wraiths.

Whoosh!

Suddenly, a pillar of light erupted within the ice cavern.

Ariel, having defeated Vampire Lord Katrina and Beast Commander Helspont, made her way back to the Silverwind Mountains. She was searching for Karl and Ted.

Meanwhile, Shane and the northern warriors had returned to the battlefield.

With two of the Demon Lord's generals defeated, the tide of war would shift dramatically in favor of the humans.

Katrina led the vampire forces, and Helspont commanded the beasts.

With their deaths, the morale of the Demon Lord's army would plummet, scattering their ranks.

Whoosh!

A fierce snowstorm swept through the Silverwind Mountains, but Ariel found Karl without much trouble. His loud voice carried across the storm.

“...Ariel!!”

His cries were loud enough to echo even through the howling wind.

“Please, I’m begging you! Answer me! Ariel!!”

His voice was hoarse from shouting.

“Ariel!!”

Flying with telekinesis, Ariel landed quietly behind him.

“Sob... Ariel, I’m sorry... It’s my fault. Please, just....”

Karl was on the ground, sobbing.

Ariel tapped his shoulder lightly.

“...Huh?”

He turned his tear-streaked face to look back.

“A-A-Ariel?”

Karl’s eyes widened.

“Ariel!!”

He sprang to his feet.

“You’re safe! Thank goodness! I was so worried!”

Karl was in terrible shape.

His face was pale, his lips blue.

Frost covered his hair and clothes, and he’d lost his gloves.

His bare hands, likely used to dig through snow, were red and cracked.

“Are you okay?” Ariel asked.

Karl nodded bravely.

“I’m fine. Perfectly fine.”

“You’re frozen solid.”

“That’s nothing. I’m the heir of the North. This kind of weather feels like a warm embrace from my mother.”

Karl smiled weakly, unaware that drool was running from his mouth due to numbness.

Ariel cast a shield around them, enveloping Karl, Ted, and herself in a protective blue barrier that blocked out the cold and snow.

In the calm, quiet space, the raging snowstorm outside battered harmlessly against the shield.

Feeling oddly emotional, Karl fell into a strange mood.

Could it be... now?

Was this the right moment?

Overcome by a sudden urge, Karl looked at Ariel with resolute determination.

She was facing him, her hand resting on his shoulder.

“.....”

Karl was sure.

This was it.

It had to be now.

Unbeknownst to him, Ariel had placed her hand on his shoulder to heal him, but Karl took it as a signal.

“Ariel,” he said solemnly.

“I have something to tell you.”

“?”

“I couldn’t say it at the Sierra banquet because you fell asleep, but I believed. If we were meant to be, we’d meet again someday....”

Karl took a deep breath, closing his eyes.

It was impossible to speak while looking directly at her.

“And... we met again, didn’t we?”

Just then, Ariel heard Levana’s voice in her head, calling for help.

Ariel, please help....

Whoosh!

A white portal appeared behind Karl.

Ariel took his hand.

“!”

Karl flinched, but to him, it felt like another signal.

He felt himself being pulled into an unfamiliar sensation as the portal activated.

Is this what people feel when confessing their love?

“T-That is... Ariel, I think I’ve liked you since the moment I saw you... No, I mean....”

Karl opened his eyes and shouted.

“I love you, Ariel!!”

His voice echoed loudly, as if shouted in a cavern.

Indeed, the surroundings had changed.

The ground and walls were frozen over, and Karl froze in place as he noticed familiar faces.

Shion, Sena, Riana, Levana—the Hero’s Party.

They were staring at him, their expressions frozen in shock.

Clearly, they’d heard everything.

“.....”

A suffocating silence descended.

“What... are they?”

Skadi tilted her head in confusion.

Just as she was about to command her Wraiths, a burst of light had appeared, revealing a massive, fluffy bear, a frost-covered human boy, and a silver-haired elf girl.

The boy was muttering to himself before suddenly shouting loudly,

“I love you, Ariel!!”

With her highly sensitive hearing, Skadi quickly covered her ears.

The boy’s voice was deafening.

And love? What nonsense was this?

Everyone else had fallen silent. It was as if time had stopped.

Skadi scratched her head, puzzled, before giving her Wraiths the command to attack.

“Charge!”

After all, nothing had changed.

More had appeared, but they would all die here anyway.

Except that fluffy bear... Skadi thought.

She planned to bring it back to the Demon Lord’s castle as a pet. The Demon Lord would surely love it.

As the Wraiths charged toward the Hero’s Party, Skadi opened her eyes wide, watching carefully.

Among them, the silver-haired elf girl drew a massive sword midair.

Chapter 146: Demon Lord's Army (20)

It was a single strike.

The elf girl's silver hair swirled gently in the air,
and the arc of her massive sword cut through the atmosphere.

Then, the world fell apart.

...At least, that's how it felt to Skadi.

Boom!

A thunderous roar.

The shattered remains of the Frost Wraiths scattered in all directions.

The ice cavern collapsed.

A silent stillness.

With a single strike, everything was over.

The hand gripping *Niverion* trembled uncontrollably.

"Th-this is impossible...."

Skadi hadn't even fully seen the elf girl swing her sword.

She moved like a faint afterimage, and in her wake, everything was destroyed.

The Frost Wraiths, the ice cavern—gone.

Now, only a canyon remained, and cold winds howled through it.

"R-r-ridiculous...."

Skadi managed to stammer.

She was terrified of the elf girl, but she couldn't retreat now.

This invasion of the North wasn't even Skadi's assignment.

Originally, the Demon Lord had planned to entrust it to Balthazar, the Shadow Lord.

But Skadi had insisted.

— *I'll do it! I'll go and kill all the humans!*

— *You? But this mission is dangerous... Even if the hero hasn't fully grown, the humans' strength....*

The Demon Lord paused mid-sentence. Skadi's rabbit ears were drooping.

— *You don't trust me, do you, Demon Lord....*

— *That's not it! Alright, Skadi, you can do it! I believe in you!*

— *R-really??*

— *Of course~! And I'll go with you.*

— *Wh-why would you come? You really don't trust me....*

— *That's not it at all! Fine, fine, you can go alone. I'll assign Katrina and Helspont to support you. They're a bit dim-witted, but they'll follow your orders. Go ahead, Skadi!*

— *I'll do it! I'll conquer the North!*

— *You don't have to conquer it... It's not that important. Just come back safely....*

Droop.

— *I mean, it's very important! The first step in conquering the continent! That's why I'm entrusting it to you! A mission of the utmost importance! Now go, Skadi!*

— *I'll do it!*

...That's how it had all started.

"The Demon Lord entrusted this to me. I can't back down," Skadi thought, biting her lip as she glared at the elf girl.

The girl had just demonstrated incredible power, but perhaps Skadi still had a chance.

You never know until you try.

"Blizzard Storm!"

Skadi shouted as she thrust *Niverion* forward.

Whooooosh!

A storm of frost surged, engulfing Ariel.
Shards of ice flew through the air.
The chilling cold bit like a blade,
while Frost Wraiths emerged from the ground, grabbing Ariel's legs
as if to hold her in place.

"Ha."

Skadi let out a cold laugh.

Her frost storm possessed terrifying power—enough to freeze even a
hero in one blow.
Ariel would surely turn into ice soon.

"Pathetic."

Skadi prepared for her next move.

Then, she heard a soft voice near her ear.

"Rabbit...."

"?!"

Skadi whipped her head around in shock.

Somehow, Ariel was already right beside her, Frost Wraiths still
clinging to her legs.

"H-how did you—!"

Skadi quickly darted away.

"Frozen Prison!"

She summoned an ice prison around Ariel.

The Frozen Prison was a technique Skadi had invented herself. Even
Helspont had struggled to break free from it during testing.
It was powerful...

Crash!

But Ariel simply smashed through it with her body.

Her gaze remained fixed on Skadi's ears.

"W-what is this!"

Skadi descended to the ground and started running.

It seemed Ariel could fly freely through the air, so fighting her on the ground would be more advantageous.

"Rise, Frost Wraiths!"

As she ran, Skadi summoned more Wraiths.

Though their numbers had significantly dwindled, they were only meant to slow Ariel down.

The Wraiths charged at Ariel, who had also landed on the ground.

Crash!

Ariel waved a hand, and the Wraiths shattered effortlessly. They flew apart in pieces, destroyed by a simple gesture.

Whoosh!

Suddenly, a massive ice spear hurtled toward Ariel.

The spear could pierce through even the thickest fortress walls with ease.

Ariel swatted it aside with her hand, and the spear disintegrated into powder.

"Ah...."

Skadi's will to fight crumbled.

Nothing worked.

“She’s not someone I can fight. She’s on the Demon Lord’s level....”

Skadi couldn’t finish her thought.

Ariel had closed the distance again, as if by teleportation.

“Eek!!”

Terrified, Skadi fell to the ground and tried to flee.

When Skadi ran on all fours, she was incredibly fast. She’d even won first place in the Demon Castle’s sports competition last year.

But...

“?!”

Her body wouldn’t move.

It felt as though an invisible hand was holding her in place.

It was Ariel’s telekinetic magic.

Skadi, still sitting, looked up at Ariel in fear. Ariel drew closer.

“No, no, don’t come near me!”

Skadi couldn’t even open her mouth to speak.

A creeping sense of terror rose within her.

Memories of her past abuse at the hands of humans surfaced.

It felt as if she’d returned to that powerless time.

Ariel reached out a hand, and Skadi squeezed her eyes shut.

“Don’t hit me...!”

Swish. Swish.

“...?”

Skadi slowly opened her eyes.

A gentle sensation on her head.

Ariel was patting her.

“.....”

Levana stared at the snow bear beside her.

So fluffy.

She found herself wanting to touch it, just once.

“...I’m not a hero.”

Beside her, Shion murmured.

He’d been muttering the same phrase repeatedly.

“I’m just a nobody....”

“.....”

Ever since he was frozen by Skadi, he’d been trapped in self-loathing.

Normally, Levana would have comforted him, but now wasn’t the time.

On the other side, Karl Castark was curled into a ball.

The young noble who had given such a rousing speech at the start of the war was now like an empty doll.

Silent, expressionless, his eyes unfocused.

Even when Levana had asked, “Aren’t you cold?” earlier, he hadn’t responded.

With the mood as it was, Sena and Riana also sat awkwardly, saying nothing.

The shield Ariel had cast surrounded them, and outside it, Ariel was playing what seemed like a game of tag with Skadi.

“It’ll end soon,” Levana thought.

For now, she focused on the snow bear.

There wasn’t much else to do.

Eventually,

Step. Step.

The shield dissipated, and Ariel approached.

The situation had been resolved.

Now, Skadi stood beside Ariel, her rabbit ears drooping.

She clung nervously to Ariel’s sleeve as if Ariel were her guardian.

It was hard to believe this little girl was one of the Demon Lord’s trusted Four Generals, once known as the Nightmare of the Battlefield.

“...We need to discuss what happens next,” Levana said in a weary voice.

The war was over, and they had to decide what to do with Skadi.

“Sir Shion, what do you think?”

“.....”

No response.

“Karl, what about you? What should we do with Skadi...?”

Karl was similarly unresponsive.

Levana glanced at Sena and Riana, but they weren’t decision-makers.

The choice lay with Shion or Karl, but neither was in any state to decide.

“I’ll make the decision,” Levana said, turning to Skadi.

The Frost Lord, Skadi.

Even though she looked like a cute child with rabbit ears, she was still their enemy.

If Ariel hadn’t intervened, Skadi would have killed the entire Hero’s Party and the humans of the Empire.

Levana had to remain objective.

Her judgment must prioritize the Empire over personal feelings.

“Please... spare me.”

Skadi spoke, her gaze fixed on the ground, her rabbit ears trembling.

“I-I don’t want to die... I want to live....”

Levana replied calmly, her voice unusually cold.

“That’s true for everyone. No one wants to die. But you tried to kill us and the people of the Empire. And now you’re asking us to spare you?”

Skadi couldn’t answer. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Levana asked again,

“Do you have any reason we should spare you?”

“.....”

Skadi remained silent, unable to offer any justification.

Deep down, she knew Levana was right.

If Ariel hadn’t appeared, she would have killed the Hero’s Party and countless humans.

“.....”

Skadi let go of Ariel's sleeve.

From their perspective, there was no reason to let her live.

Demon Lord....

Skadi thought of the Demon Lord, who was like a parent to her.

He had always been kind, indulging her whims no matter how unreasonable.

Even this mission had been assigned to her because she had stubbornly insisted.

“I'm sorry for failing to conquer the North....”

Tears streamed down Skadi's face, freezing into frost as they fell.

“Thank you for everything....”

Skadi accepted her impending death.

Chapter 147: Demon Lord's Army (21)

Snow began to gently fall from the sky.
The flakes descended like dancers, softly landing upon the ground.
Rustle, rustle.
A serene silence enveloped the area.
The only sound was the faint sniffing of Skadi.

Levana quietly raised her gaze to look at Skadi.
The girl kept her head bowed low, tears dripping down her cheeks.
Her drooping rabbit ears, her shoulders trembling sorrowfully.

It stirred a sense of pity in Levana.

How did things come to this?
Why must they fight each other?

Skadi said nothing now.
She no longer pleaded for her life or proclaimed her wish to live.
She simply clenched her small fists tightly, as though ready to accept her fate.

Levana spoke.
“Skadi. If we spare you, will you kill humans again?”

“.....”

Skadi hesitated for a moment but then slowly shook her head.

“You won’t?”

“...No.”

“Why not?”

“...Because they want to live, too.”

Levana narrowed her eyes.

As a saint chosen by the gods, she had the ability to discern truth.

And she saw clearly that Skadi was sincere.

The girl was, at her core, a good being.

But people's hearts can change at any time.

“Can you promise? That you'll never harm humans again.”

“...As long as they don't attack me first.”

“Alright.”

Levana stepped closer to Skadi.

“Then promise me. Promise that you won't harm humans unless they harm you first.”

Levana extended her pinky finger.

“If you hook your finger with mine, that's a promise. And it's a promise you can never break.”

“.....”

Skadi slowly reached out and hooked her pinky with Levana's.

It seemed like it was her first time doing something like this, as she momentarily forgot her tears and smiled faintly.

“Thank you.”

Levana smiled as well.

Skadi looked puzzled.

“...But aren't you going to kill me anyway?”

“Normally, yes, but there's a better way.”

“A better way...?”

“From now on, you're a hostage. We'll be extracting information about the Demon Lord's army from you.”

“A hostage...? Information...?”

Skadi tilted her head, then her expression darkened.

“But I don’t want to harm the Demon Lord. If my information puts him in danger, I’d rather you just kill me now....”

“What I want is peace,” Levana said calmly. “I’ll only use your information to bring about peace, not to start another war.”

“Then... no, but... I can’t give you anything too important. That would be betrayal. I don’t want to betray the Demon Lord.”

“Understood. Then just tell us what you’re comfortable sharing.”

Levana decided to compromise.

Even if they didn’t extract any useful information, simply holding Skadi as a hostage would grant the Empire a strategic advantage if another war broke out.

In that sense, keeping Skadi alive as a hostage was more beneficial to the Empire than killing her now.

“For now, we’ll keep your status as a hostage a secret,” Levana added.

Of course, not everyone would agree.

There were bound to be voices calling for Skadi’s execution.

“You’ll be officially known as someone who was defeated by Hero Shion. That’s what both the Empire and the Demon Lord’s army will hear.”

“.....”

Skadi’s face grew sullen.

The Demon Lord would surely be saddened by the news.

“Demon Lord... I miss the Demon Lord....”

“You’ll need to endure. If you’re patient, I’m sure you’ll see him again. When the war ends, we’ll set you free.”

“R-really?”

Skadi's ears perked up slightly, and her face brightened.

Levana nodded.

"So, until then, you need to behave and follow my instructions."

"O-okay. I'll do as you say, but you have to promise I'll see the Demon Lord again."

Skadi extended her pinky finger, mimicking Levana.

Levana smiled and hooked her pinky with Skadi's.

"I promise."

"Thank you...."

"Then, let's make peace now."

"O-okay...."

Skadi awkwardly blushed, and Levana gently hugged her.

Skadi hesitated but then extended her arms to hug Levana in return.

Nearby, Ariel patted Ted the snow bear while chewing on an aurora jelly, her gaze still fixed intently on Skadi's rabbit ears with a glint of desire.

"...Well, reconciliation is always good, I guess," Mage Sena muttered as she walked over and hugged Skadi as well.

Not long after, Elf Warrior Riana cleared her throat and joined in, wrapping her arms around Skadi too.

It was an awkward but heartwarming scene.

"...I'm not a hero."

"....."

Shion, however, remained dejected, still muttering to himself, while Karl sat beside him, lost in his own despondent silence.

When the Hero's Party returned to the Ruin Plains with Skadi in tow,

the war was already over.

The moment Shane announced the deaths of Katrina and Helspont, the vampire and monster armies fled in terror without even putting up a fight.

Though the conclusion felt somewhat anticlimactic, it was fortunate the war ended with minimal casualties.

The northern warriors gathered on the plains erupted in cheers when they saw the Hero's Party returning safely.

"Hurrah!"

Their safe return was proof they had successfully defeated Skadi, the Frost Lord.

"Long live the Hero's Party!"

With Karl riding beside the party on Ted the snow bear, the cheers grew even louder.

"Long live Castark!"

"Eternal glory to the North!"

The heroes were celebrated for repelling the Demon Lord's army and protecting the Empire.

Among them, Shion drew the most attention.

Despite having only recently drawn the Hero's Sword, he had already accomplished a great feat—a sign of a bright future for the Empire.

But,

"...Why does he look like that?"

"He's been muttering something under his breath...."

Shion's expression was far from triumphant.

His face bore a self-deprecating look as he continued muttering to himself.

Levana, watching, decided she would need to have a serious talk with

him once they reached the castle. If left unchecked, his state could lead to problems.

Meanwhile, Karl also seemed odd to the onlookers.

Once a confident figure leading his people astride a snow bear, he now clung to Ariel's cloak as she controlled Ted.

His gaze was unfocused, his mouth slightly agape. He looked utterly dazed.

"Ugh, it's so noisy... too loud...."

Skadi, sitting in front of Ariel with her rabbit ears hidden beneath a cloak, winced at the noise.

Noticing this, Ariel used her hands to cover Skadi's ears and took the opportunity to softly stroke them.

Skadi's ears were even softer than Ariel had imagined.

"T-that tickles...."

Skadi squirmed and trembled, but Ariel didn't stop.

"This rabbit is extraordinary," Ariel thought. "I'm definitely cuddling her tonight."

That was all she cared about for now.

Chapter 148: Ideal Type

To celebrate the defeat of the Demon King's army, a banquet was held at Castarc Castle.

People ate, drank, danced, and sang, reveling in the festivities. They praised the heroes, their swords, the Empire, and the North.

The atmosphere was lively and boisterous.

But Sion sat in a corner of the banquet hall with a gloomy expression.

Levena approached him.

"Sir Sion."

"Oh, Levena."

"Are you okay? Why aren't you eating anything?"

"It's just..."

A self-deprecating smile appeared on Sion's face.

"I feel like I didn't really contribute much in this war."

"...We all feel the same. None of us were truly prepared."

"....."

Sion narrowed his eyes as he looked around the hall.

Everyone was enjoying the banquet with cheerful faces.

"I wanted to protect the Empire. The Empire believed in me. They took in a nobody like me and made me a hero. I wanted to repay that trust, even if it cost me my life. But..."

Sion sighed deeply.

"This time, I realized something. I'm not worthy of protecting the Empire. I don't even have the strength to do so."

"Sir Sion..."

A sad smile appeared on Levena's lips.

"If that's how you see it, then I'm no different. They call me the chosen saint, but honestly, my faith isn't that strong. I only call on God when I need Him. Most of the time, I hide in the sanctuary pretending to pray, but I'm just snacking. Sometimes I even sneak out

to play. Still, I try to do what I can, even if it's not much."

"...Being a saint sounds like a tough job."

"It was tough at first. There were times I just wanted to die. I even cursed God, wondering why I had to be born as a saint. But not anymore. I've learned to let go. So what if I snack or play outside? As long as I do my job when it matters, it's fine. That's how I see it now."

Levena spoke with a sincere expression.

"So, Sir Sion, I hope you won't blame yourself too much. We all failed. Honestly, we were a mess from the start. Getting swept away by a flood—what was that even...?"

Sion chuckled at her words.

It was absurd, now that he thought about it.

"Still, we did save a village afterward."

"Exactly. Without us, those people would have lost their livestock and faced danger from monsters."

In truth, they had Ariel's help back then, but Levena didn't mention it.

"Sir Sion."

Levena held Sion's hand.

"I think you're amazing. You're a bit reckless and impulsive, but you're passionate and brave. The enemy was just stronger this time, but if you keep trying, you'll get stronger too. No matter the outcome, I hope you'll do your best. People believe in you, Sir Sion. I do too."

"....."

Sion's face turned red.

"Le-Levena..."

"Sir Sion."

Sion stared at her, and Levena didn't shy away from his gaze. Though Sion's eyes held a budding emotion, Levena didn't notice.

Moonlit Fountain

Cal sighed as he gazed up at the sky.

This isn't what I wanted...

He had finally confessed his feelings to Ariel.

But it had turned out far differently than he imagined.

Cal had wanted to express his heart in a quiet, romantic setting.

Instead, he'd shouted, "Ariel, I like you!!" in the middle of the hero party, surrounded by enemies.

What a mess.

How must Ariel have felt? She must have been mortified.

"Haah..."

Cal buried his face in his hands.

Everything was going wrong. He felt like he was becoming more and more pathetic in Ariel's eyes.

Footsteps echoed behind him.

Without looking, he could tell who it was.

It had to be Shane.

Since the war was over, Cal needed to deliver a speech thanking the warriors and heroes who had defended the Empire.

"Alright, I'm coming," he muttered, standing up.

He had spent plenty of time "gathering his thoughts," so Shane's impatience was understandable.

"?"

But the person standing before him wasn't Shane.

"Ariel?"

It was Ariel.

Cal froze, holding his breath.

Under the moonlight, her silver hair shimmered like flowing water, and her ruby-red eyes sparkled.

Even though her expression was indifferent, to Cal, she looked like a

dream.

His heart raced. Why had she come to see him at such a late hour?

She hadn't spoken to him once since his confession. She had just been playing with a rabbit-eared girl.

But... had she been thinking about him all along?

Could it be... Ariel feels the same way I do?

Ariel approached him, her hair damp and fragrant, as if she'd just bathed.

Cal fidgeted nervously.

"A-Ariel..."

"By the way."

Ariel finally spoke.

"Can I have more Aurora Jelly?"

"....."

"In return, I'll give you this."

She pulled something out of thin air—a slice of chocolate cake.

The cake floated toward Cal, who stared at it in stunned silence.

Ariel's face turned uneasy.

"Or this."

This time, a macaron appeared.

Cal still didn't respond.

She couldn't have come here just for jelly... Could she? Is she too shy to admit her feelings?

He glanced at Ariel. She bit her lip, her gaze lowered. Her expression was pleading.

It was the first time Cal had seen her look so vulnerable.

So she was thinking about me after all...

Cal stepped closer to Ariel.

“Ariel...”

Regaining his confidence, Cal prepared to act. He was the most handsome man in the North—no, in the entire Empire. Women, even princesses, blushed at his gaze.

Ariel was no different, he reasoned. As a woman, she must be embarrassed.

This was his chance to be bold.

“Did you really come just for Aurora Jelly?”

“Yes.”

“Liar.”

Cal smiled.

“You’re adorable.”

“?”

“You don’t have to be shy, Ariel.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I know how you feel...”

Leaning closer, Cal moved in for a kiss. His heart pounded, but he was determined to show his manliness...

“Gahh!”

Ariel grabbed his neck, squeezing tightly.

Cal flailed, choking.

“A-Ariel...!”

“Give me the jelly.”

“I-I’ll give it to you!”

Cal frantically pulled a pouch of Aurora Jelly from his pocket and

handed it to her.

Finally, Ariel released him.

Cal collapsed to the ground, looking up at Ariel with a mixture of fear and confusion.

Meanwhile, Ariel calmly popped a piece of jelly into her mouth, chewing happily.

So... she didn't feel the same?

As that thought crossed his mind, Ariel leaned down and whispered something into Cal's ear.

“!!”

His face froze in shock.

Back in the banquet hall, Cal gave a rousing speech and mingled with northern nobles, discussing the future of the Empire.

But his eyes occasionally darted to Ariel, his expression betraying a mix of unease and denial.

Meanwhile, Sion had regained his usual energy.

“Ariel, thank you. We had your help this time, but next time, I'll defeat the Demon King's army myself. When we return to the capital, I'll train harder than ever. And, um, by the way...”

Lowering his voice, he asked,

“Do you know what Levena likes? Like, her favorite food, hobbies, or maybe... her ideal type?”

“Her favorite food is macarons. Her hobby is knitting. Her ideal type is...”

Ariel tilted her head thoughtfully.

Just then, Levena approached.

“Levena.”

“Yes?”

“What’s your ideal type?”

“!!”

Sion froze, his face turning as red as a beet. How could Ariel ask so directly?!

Fortunately, no one noticed his embarrassment.

Levena hesitated before answering.

“I think...”

“Someone like Urkanos,” Riana interrupted.

“Strong men like Urkanos, with broad shoulders—”

“Riana, Urkanos is a puppet. Ariel controls him.”

“Don’t be so narrow-minded, Saint.”

“What are you all talking about?”

Sena appeared, carrying a plate of food.

“Something fun?”

“We’re discussing ideal types,” Levena explained. “What’s yours, Sena?”

Sena smirked.

“Honestly, men are boring. If I had to pick an ideal type... it’d be Ariel. Her magic is incredible.”

“...Ariel is a woman.”

“That’s why men are boring.”

Sena popped a piece of fruit into her mouth.

“Anyway, what should we do when we return to the capital? How about shopping? I want to visit a magic tools store.”

“Then I’ll buy some arrows. There’s a Dwarven craftsman’s shop in the capital, right?”

“I’ll probably visit Delight. Ariel, you’re coming, right?”

“Yes.”

As the others chatted, Sion quietly bit his lip.

But seriously... what is Levena’s ideal type?!

Chapter 149: Exhibition (1)

The Empire buzzed with excitement for days.
It was a celebration of their stunning victory against the Demon Lord's army.

The Hero's Party and the Castarc family, who had defended the North, were praised endlessly.
A grand festival was held in the capital, and people came together to rejoice in their shared triumph.

But the war wasn't over yet.
This was merely the first victory.

Because of this, Hero Shion secluded himself in his mansion, focusing solely on training.
Mage Sena returned to the Mage Tower, Elf Warrior Riana went back to the Elven Forest,
And Saintess Levana continued her prayers and holy rituals at the cathedral.

As the fervor of victory slowly subsided and the Empire returned to its daily life...

"Hey, have you read that book? The one about the Giants?"
"Oh, *Giants Are Alive*? Of course, I have! Everyone's talking about it!"
"It's mind-blowing, isn't it? Giants are alive—and living in a world where time flows differently!"

The book authored by Lu had been published.

The Empire's largest and most influential printing house, *Lexicon*, was anything but cheerful at the moment.
The cause of their distress?

The book *Giants Are Alive*, which had taken the Empire by storm.

The book chronicled an adventure in search of the Giants.
It had become a sensation, captivating commoners, nobles, and even the royal family.

No matter where one went in the capital, conversations about the book were unavoidable.

Normally, the printing house would welcome such widespread attention.

But...

“You idiot, Tucker! What have you done?!”

There was a problem.

“We could have been the ones to publish that book! Lu came to us first! We could’ve basked in the glory of publishing this masterpiece! But no, you blew it, Tucker!”

That’s right. Lexicon had missed out on the chance to publish the book—

All because of one man: Tucker.

Tucker had rejected Lu’s manuscript.

And now, he was being scolded mercilessly by the printing house’s director.

“Do you know what Her Highness said? She called us arrogant! She said we’ve lost our humility, that we pick and choose manuscripts and fail to see potential in new works! What do you think about that, Tucker? Do you think Her Highness is wrong?”

The director’s icy voice made Tucker lower his head in shame.

“I—I’m sorry... It was a mistake. That fairy girl and the one in the rabbit outfit...”

Thwack!

A stack of papers struck Tucker square in the face.

“If it was a mistake, then fix it, you idiot! Go find the author and beg for forgiveness! Apologize to Her Highness, too! If you don’t, you’re finished! Do you think you’ll just lose your job? Your family will be held accountable for damages! You’ve completely ruined Lexicon’s reputation!”

“I—I understand. I’ll do whatever it takes to make amends....”

“You pathetic fool! I should never have hired you... What are you standing around for? Go!”

“Yes, sir! I’ll go immediately!”

Tucker hastily left the office, his steps heavy with resentment.

Clomp, clomp.

“Damn it all....”

He muttered a string of curses under his breath as he walked.

“This is all that blasted fairy’s fault....”

A murderous glint flickered in his eyes.

The main square of the Empire’s capital was bustling with people. An exhibition for *Giants Are Alive* was underway.

Crowds lined up to see the author, Lu, and to hear about his adventures.

“Did Lu really see a Giant?”

“Yeah, I heard he even spoke with them!”

“I’m so curious about that world where time flows differently.”

The exhibition was being held at the Imperial Palace Exhibition Hall—the grandest building in the capital.

Typically reserved for major events or receptions for foreign dignitaries, it was the cultural and artistic heart of the Empire.

To host an author’s exhibition there was an immense honor.

“...Big Sis, I’m so nervous.”

Naturally, Lu was a bundle of nerves.

Dressed in a tailored jacket designed for his fairy-sized body, with his hair slicked back, Lu looked surprisingly sharp.

“Do you think I’ll do okay?”

Ariel, standing beside him, smiled faintly and nodded.

“You’ll do fine.”

Ariel, too, was dressed differently than usual.

She wore an elegant velvet dress with a subtle blue shimmer.

After all, she would also be stepping into the public eye today.

She was one of the main characters in *Giants Are Alive*.

At the entrance of the exhibition hall stood a large model of the Giant god *Urkanos*, and nearby, dolls of the significant character *Theodoros* were being sold.

“...It’s amazing to think so many humans came here just to see Lu and Ariel,” murmured Lakia, who was wearing a bright-colored dress for the occasion.

“By the way, when’s Levana getting here? Can she make it?”

At that moment, the crowd parted as a group of distinguished figures approached.

It was Crown Princess Iliana, along with Hero Shion and his sister Clara.

The gathered crowd quickly stepped aside, bowing respectfully as the trio walked toward Lu.

“Wow, Lu, you look amazing today!” Iliana teased with a grin.

“Or should I call you Lu-sensei now?”

“N-no, just Lu the author is fine....”

Lu blushed and scratched his head.

“Haha, then Lu the author, would you sign something for me later?”

“For you, Princess, of course.”

“Um, excuse me... Could I get one too?” Clara shyly asked from the side.

“The kids at the orphanage really want your autograph....”

“Clara, of course! I’d be happy to. In fact, I’ll visit the orphanage myself.”

“Really? That would make the kids so happy! And, um... could Ariel come too...?”

Lu’s book had detailed Ariel’s heroic deeds: defeating the Kraken in the Silrand River, clearing the massive rock wall in the Giant village, and more.

“I’ll go with Lu,” Ariel said.

Clara beamed.

“Thank you so much!”

Soon, the exhibition officially began.

The crowd cheered Lu’s name, and he grew even more anxious.

“Big Sis, I think I need to use the restroom. I’ll be quick!”

Lu darted into the men’s restroom, escaping the clamor outside. The restroom was quiet and empty.

“Hah... I can’t believe this is real. My book is such a big hit.”

Lu chuckled to himself as he flew toward the stalls.

Suddenly, someone entered, locked the door, and turned the latch with a *click*.

Unaware, Lu finished his business and turned around—only to come face-to-face with a man.

The man grinned, but Lu squinted in recognition.

“...Do I know you?”

“Hah, what a surprise. Who would’ve thought that pathetic manuscript would blow up like this?”

“...Oh.”

Lu’s eyes widened as he remembered.

“You—you’re from Lexicon...!”

Standing before him was Tucker.

“You bit my ear and ran away last time, didn’t you?”

Tucker’s eyes gleamed dangerously as he stepped closer.

“It hurt like hell, you know.”

The atmosphere turned menacing.

“Well, now it’s your turn to hurt.”

Tucker grabbed Lu.

“When I catch a winged insect, the first thing I do is tear off its wings. I’ve always wondered—does it hurt?”

He reached for Lu’s wings.

Flash!

Using his Blink ring, Lu teleported out of Tucker’s grasp.

“Uh... I really need to get back. Can we talk later?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I plan to rip your head off right here.”

Tucker lunged again, but Lu Blinked away once more.

The restroom was a confined space.

Blink only worked within visible range, and with the door locked, there was no escape.

What's worse, Blink had limited uses.

Flash!

"You've got a neat trick there."

Lu used up his last Blink and was eventually caught by Tucker's hand.

"Fairies can produce sleeping powder, can't they? Aren't you going to try that?"

"....."

Tucker tightened his grip, causing Lu to grimace in pain.

"Ahhh! L-let me go!"

"Haha, maybe I'll squish you instead. Fairies are so... delicate."

Bang!

Suddenly, a stall door burst open, and someone stepped out.

"What the—?"

Tucker turned around, not looking particularly concerned.

"Someone was in here?"

The figure was a young boy.

If Tucker had attended the recent festival honoring the Hero's Party, he would've recognized him.

"Shion, help me...!" Lu cried out, wriggling in Tucker's grasp.

The boy who stepped out was none other than Hero Shion.

Chapter 150: Exhibition (2)

The book [*Giants Are Alive*] became an instant sensation upon its release.

The adventure of the fairy Lu and the elf Ariel in search of the ancient Giants, long thought extinct, captivated readers with its thrilling and emotional story.

Crossing the scorching Caldora Desert, facing a terrifying sandstorm that Ariel effortlessly stopped with her telekinesis.

A one-sided battle where Ariel overpowered the Dragon Lord of the southern jungle, leaving him uncharacteristically docile.

A riddle contest with Theodoras, the divine beast of the Siland River.

An epic battle against the legendary Kraken of the Abyss.

And their journey to the mysterious world of Asgard, where time flowed differently from their own.

Tucker had read the book with bated breath. When Ariel and Lu finally discovered the Giants, he felt chills running down his spine.

By the time they said their farewells to Theodoras, Tucker's eyes had welled up with tears.

He had to admit it.

[*Giants Are Alive*] was an incredible book.

Though Ariel's feats seemed exaggerated, Tucker couldn't help but cheer internally during each battle, shouting in his mind, "Win!" No doubt, some readers had actually shouted it aloud.

If the usually cynical Tucker could be this moved, it was no surprise that the public was enthralled.

Whether the book was fact or fiction didn't matter. Its sheer entertainment value had captivated the Empire.

With Princess Iliana personally promoting it, the book's popularity skyrocketed. Now, everywhere one went, people were talking about *[Giants Are Alive]*.

But the book's success filled Tucker with a storm of anger, despair, and fear. He couldn't forgive himself for missing the opportunity to publish it.

Originally, the manuscript of *[Giants Are Alive]* had landed in Tucker's hands first.

But when he saw that it had been submitted by a lowly fairy and a peculiar girl in a rabbit costume, he dismissed it without a second thought.

He'd assumed it was a worthless manuscript.

That assumption became the biggest mistake of his life.

Princess Iliana had somehow discovered what happened and publicly criticized Lexicon, calling them arrogant, saying they rejected manuscripts without recognizing their potential.

Lexicon's reputation was in ruins.

The public, enamored with *[Giants Are Alive]*, mocked Lexicon's shortsightedness. Prominent authors severed ties with the publishing house, fearing association with its tarnished image.

And it was all because of Tucker.

Now, Tucker faced blame from every corner of Lexicon. His superiors threatened to hold his family accountable for the damages.

Tucker was overwhelmed with sleepless nights of guilt and regret, though he knew it was too late to fix anything.

His superior's orders to apologize to Lu and beg for the princess's forgiveness wouldn't change the outcome. Lexicon would likely issue a public statement saying, "*We apologize for the controversy. The responsible employee has been dismissed.*"

Tucker would lose his job, his reputation, and even face financial ruin.

In his despair, Tucker's self-loathing turned outward. He began to believe that none of this would have happened if not for that meddling fairy.

"If that damned fairy hadn't appeared..."

If not for Lu, Tucker thought, he would still have his promising career and an impending promotion.

The resentment festered and grew until it consumed him.

And then, a dangerous thought took hold.

"If the fairy were gone, this could all be resolved..."

Tucker convinced himself that eliminating Lu would fix everything.

Hearing the commotion outside, Sion swiftly emerged from the stall.

He saw Ariel's friend, Lu, caught in the grip of an angry man.

"S-Sion, help me...!"

Lu pleaded, his eyes desperate.

Sion turned his gaze to the man.

"Let go of that fairy."

"What?"

The man scoffed, his expression full of disdain.

"Kid, don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong. Walk away, or you'll regret—"

Pow!

Before he could finish, Sion's fist connected with his face.

For an ordinary thug, there was no need for Sion to draw his sword.

"Gah!"

The man stumbled backward, clutching his face. Sion's punch, honed through rigorous training, was no joke.

"Heh..."

The man chuckled bitterly as he stood up.

"Now even some brat thinks he can disrespect me? Fine. Let's end this. I'll take you down too!"

Consumed by rage, the man charged at Sion.

Despite his fury, the man was no match for Sion. The hero dodged his clumsy attacks with ease and delivered a powerful uppercut to his jaw.

Thud!

The man collapsed, unconscious.

Sion immediately turned his attention to Lu.

"Are you okay, Lu?"

"Y-Yeah. Thanks, Sion."

Lu fluttered up and gently tapped Sion's cheek with his tiny hands.

"Wow, you're way stronger than I thought! That was pretty cool!"

"R-Really...?"

Sion scratched his head, a bit embarrassed.

"But what happened, Lu? How did you get into this mess?"

"I was just trying to use the restroom, but I had the bad luck of running into that guy. We've got a bit of a history, but there's no time to explain now. I need to get back quickly."

Straightening his jacket and hair, Lu gestured toward the restroom door.

"Sion, could you open the door for me?"

“Sure.”

Sion walked over and opened the door.

Lu tapped Sion’s cheek once more and said,
“Thanks again, Sion. I’ll leave the rest to you. Make sure to handle that guy.”

“Got it. Hurry back.”

With a quick flutter, Lu zipped out of the restroom.

Watching him go, Sion tilted his head in confusion.
“‘Just trying to use the restroom,’ huh...”

A puzzled expression crossed Sion’s face.
“...He’s a guy?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, good evening!”

The emcee’s voice rang out across the exhibition hall.

“Thank you all for joining us for this special occasion! Wow, what an extraordinary audience we have today. Even Her Highness the Princess and Saint Levana are here... and I hear the Hero himself is in attendance! My heart is racing just being here. How about you all?”

“Yes!”

“As you all know, we’re here to celebrate the release of [*Giants Are Alive*] with this grand exhibition. Judging by your faces, I can see how much excitement this book has generated! Of course, I’ve read it myself, and let me just say—it’s truly remarkable. Even I, a man who rarely cries, couldn’t hold back when Theodoras said goodbye...”

The emcee feigned a tearful expression, eliciting laughter from the crowd.

“Although, I’ll admit the riddle contest left me absolutely stumped!”

“Hahaha!”

The room filled with laughter, creating a lively atmosphere.

The emcee took a deep breath and continued.

“Now, shall we bring out the author?”

“Yes!”

“Of course, you’re not here to listen to me talk, right?”

“Right!”

“Alright then, let’s welcome the author of [*Giants Are Alive*], Mr. Lu!”

“Wooo!”

The audience erupted into cheers and applause.

But as seconds ticked by, Lu didn’t appear.

10 seconds.

20 seconds.

30 seconds...

Murmurs of confusion spread through the crowd.

“Uh, Mr. Lu?”

The emcee’s voice wavered slightly.

“Mr. Lu...?”

The audience grew uneasy, and even Princess Iliana and Saint Levana exchanged puzzled glances.

“Could something have happened to Lu...?” Levana murmured worriedly.

Finally, a small figure emerged from behind the curtain.

“Good evening, everyone.”

It was Lu.

“I am Lu, the author of [*Giants Are Alive*].”

“Ahhh!”

“It’s Lu!”

“The author!”

The crowd erupted into cheers.

Lu waved shyly, and the emcee let out a relieved sigh.

“Phew! Mr. Lu, you really know how to make an entrance. That was dramatic! Was it intentional?”

Lu chuckled and nodded.

“It was.”

“Knew it!”

“Hahaha!”

“Well done! Your appearance should always be memorable! Now that Mr. Lu has joined us safely, shall we bring out the next guest?”

“Yes!”

“Do you know who’s next?”

“The Elf!”

“Ariel!”

“That’s right! Joining us is the adventurer who accompanied Mr. Lu. As described by Mr. Lu himself: the cutest, kindest, and strongest being in the world! Let’s welcome Ariel!”

“Wooo!”

Amid the roaring applause, a girl stepped onto the stage.

Her silvery hair, tied back elegantly, shimmered under the lights, and her blue velvet dress complemented her graceful demeanor.

It was Ariel.

“Ahhh!”

The exhibition hall erupted into thunderous cheers.

Chapter 151: Skadi's Ice Castle

The exhibition proceeded smoothly.

The emcee posed various questions to Lu and Ariel. Lu's witty answers and Ariel's blunt responses kept the audience entertained.

Next came a session where attendees could ask questions about key events from the book:

The sandstorm in the Caldora Desert, the Dragon Lord in the southern jungle, Theodoras of the Siland River, the Kraken, Asgard, the Giant Village, and more.

Lu answered each question sincerely, adding vivid details that brought the story to life.

— *Everything in the book is true. Asgard and the Giants are real.*

This was the message Lu wanted to convey.

— *However, I can't reveal the location or how to reach Asgard. The Giants are cautious about interference from other beings, and contact between worlds could lead to chaos.*

The audience nodded seriously and applauded in agreement.

Next, Princess Iliana shared her thoughts on the book, and Saint Levana spoke about its emotional depth and lessons.

Sion, however, remained silent.

He hadn't read the book.

The only reason he attended the exhibition was to see Levana.

Even so, he pretended to understand whenever the crowd cheered or

commented.

“Oh, yeah, that part was amazing. Theodoras, what a guy...” he muttered to himself, having no idea what anyone was talking about.

The man who attacked Lu in the restroom had been taken away by palace guards.

This was the Imperial Palace Exhibition Hall.

Causing a disturbance here meant severe punishment, and the man would not escape harsh consequences.

As the exhibition neared its conclusion, discussions turned to the book’s production.

Hearing about Lexicon’s rejection of the manuscript, the crowd erupted in boos, while the small printing house *Biblia* gained praise.

Since publishing Lu’s book, *Biblia* had drawn immense attention. Its owner’s children’s book, *The Elf Girl’s Adventure*, once purchased only by Clara, was now a bestseller, selling out across the Empire.

— *Ladies and gentlemen, as much as we’d like to continue, we’re nearing the end of the event.*

The emcee’s voice carried through the hall.

— *Today has been a memorable experience, hearing from author Mr. Lu, Lady Ariel, Her Highness the Princess, and Saint Levana.*

The audience nodded and applauded.

— *To wrap up, we’ll hold a book signing. Mr. Lu and Lady Ariel will personally sign your copies. Please line up to the right of the stage if you’d like an autograph.*

The crowd eagerly rose, clutching their books.

— *With that, we conclude the [Giants Are Alive] exhibition. Thank you.*

The Lord of Frost: Skadi

One of the Demon King’s Four Trusted Generals.

A terrifying figure once called the Nightmare of the Battlefield.
The Frost Lord, Skadi.

“...That’s me. Nice to meet you.”

Skadi spoke to the wolf cub Ash, who sat in front of her.
Beside Ash was a slightly dejected bear cub named Sam, who was
more of a reluctant companion than a friend, as Ash had essentially
dragged him along.

Skadi, having followed Ariel to the Evergreen Forest, initially
struggled to adapt.

The forest was home to a fearsome dragon: Elysion.

Skadi had heard of Elysion before.
The dragon that once clashed with Baalbelith, a commander of the
Demon King’s army, during the invasion of the Lizardman Kingdom.
Though Baalbelith cast a curse at the cost of his life, Elysion
remained unscathed.

Living in a forest created by such a dragon left Skadi constantly on
edge.

To make matters worse, Elysion’s daughter, Lakia, also lived here.

The first time Skadi met Lakia, the dragon was in her human form,
wearing a rabbit costume.
Skadi, caught off guard by her appearance, had approached without
hesitation.

“You’re cute. Where’d you get that outfit?”

But Lakia shed the rabbit costume and transformed into her true,
enormous dragon form.

— *How dare you call a great dragon cute!*

When Lakia unleashed her *Dragon Fear*, Skadi had immediately
wilted, her ears drooping as she trembled.

— *I’ll turn that tiny body of yours into ashes!*

Fortunately, Ariel intervened, sparing Skadi from complete humiliation.

“It was just a joke, Lady Ariel,” Lakia had said with a grin, but the incident left Skadi traumatized.

Now, Skadi avoided Lakia whenever possible. Ariel also made her uneasy, though less so.

The only ones she felt at ease with were Saint Levana and the tiny fairy Lu, though both were often busy and rarely in the forest.

Left on her own, Skadi began making new friends: Ash and Sam. Neither of them were scary.

“Hey, want to visit my castle?”

Skadi had built a small ice castle in the forest. Constructed with her frost powers, it was sturdy and impervious to the forest’s warm weather. It was her sanctuary.

“I even have an ice slide. Let’s play together.”

Ash eagerly nodded and stood, while Sam hesitated, glancing longingly beyond the forest as if he wished to return to his family and friends.

But when Ash shot him a sharp look, Sam reluctantly rose and followed.

“Come in. This is my castle.”

Skadi opened the door with a proud gesture.
“No one can enter without my permission...”

Her words trailed off as her eyes narrowed.

Someone was standing atop her ice slide.

They were crouched as if about to slide down.

“...Who’s there?”

Skadi reached for Niverion, the magical weapon that shrank to stay hidden on her person.

“...The real question is, who are you?”

The intruder replied nonchalantly.

Their brazen demeanor irritated Skadi.

“I am Skadi, Lord of Frost. How dare you enter my castle without permission!”

Skadi enlarged Niverion, her voice rising in anger.

“Get off my slide at once, you insolent dwarf!”

Indeed, the intruder was a dwarf, with a golden beard.

Emboldened by this discovery, Skadi’s confidence soared.

She might cower before dragons or Ariel, but there was no reason to fear a dwarf.

“Oho, what a magnificent weapon you’ve got there. A magic artifact, I assume, given its ability to change size?”

The dwarf admired Niverion with sparkling eyes.

“Mind if I take a closer look? I’ve gotten quite skilled at crafting weapons myself...”

“Blizzard Storm!”

Before he could finish, Skadi unleashed a storm of frost with a swing of Niverion.

Ash leapt excitedly, while Sam collapsed in fear.

Kwoooooosh!

Even Hero Sion had struggled against this frost storm, but the dwarf easily blocked it.

“Shield.”

With a simple word, a blue barrier appeared, nullifying the attack.

Skadi was stunned.

“...Who are you?”

It was clear this dwarf was no ordinary craftsman.

“Well...”

The dwarf grinned as he slid down the ice slide.

Landing gracefully, he strolled toward Skadi.

Towering slightly over her, he smirked.

“I’m a dwarf, as you can see. And a skilled weapon artisan.”

“Liar. You’re no dwarf. Reveal your true identity!”

“Well, if you insist...”

The dwarf’s golden eyes gleamed.

“Let me show you.”

To Skadi’s bewilderment, the dwarf began removing his clothes.

“...What?”

Skadi’s jaw dropped at the absurdity of the scene, but the dwarf remained composed, undeterred by her reaction.

As he stood bare, he spread his arms wide and declared,

“Behold! I am the great—”

Creak!

The sound of the ice castle’s door opening interrupted him.

Both Skadi and the dwarf turned to see Ariel, Levana, Lokia, and Lu

standing there.

“.....”

A suffocating silence fell.

Everyone stared at the naked dwarf in shock.

“...Lionel,” Lakia said in a trembling voice.

“What are you doing in front of Skadi... like this?”

“.....”

The dwarf’s true identity was Lionel.

Lionel was a dragon.

Dragons typically didn’t wear clothes and felt no shame in showing their natural forms.

Their beautiful, indestructible scales were a point of pride.

Lionel had only ever worn clothes because of Elysion’s advice:
— *We may not mind, but others might feel uncomfortable. Respecting other cultures will help us coexist peacefully.*

Standing before Skadi, Lionel hadn’t felt the least bit embarrassed to undress.

It was purely practical—his clothes would be ruined if he transformed.

But now...

Lakia looked irritated, Levana shielded her eyes, Lu seemed awkward, and Ariel...

Ariel studied Lionel with an amused, curious gaze.

Her expression said, *Interesting.*

So... humiliating...

Lionel’s face turned crimson.

Thus, another embarrassing chapter was added to Lionel's history.

Chapter 152: A New Adventure

Lionel had locked himself in a small room within Skadi's ice castle.

Hours passed, and he still hadn't emerged.

Tired of waiting, Lakia knocked on the door.

Knock, knock.

"Lionel, open the door."

No response.

"Hey! Open up!"

Bang, bang!

Lakia knocked harder, her voice rising in frustration.

"Um... Lakia..."

Levana spoke cautiously.

"Maybe we should leave him alone? He might need some time to himself."

Meanwhile, Skadi looked distressed.

"T-this is my ice castle... Why is he just hiding in there? I wish he'd leave already..."

"Skadi..."

Levana tried to console her, pulling Skadi into a gentle hug.

Standing nearby, Ariel finally stepped forward.

"I'll go in."

Without waiting for a response, Ariel grasped the door handle.

Whirrr!

She sensed a magical barrier.

It seemed Lionel had sealed the door with his magic.
The barrier was strong—what one would expect from a dragon—but it didn't faze Ariel.

She opened the door effortlessly.

Crack!

The barrier shattered as if it were nothing.

“W-what?!”

Lionel's startled voice came from inside.

“D-don't come in!”

Ignoring his protests, Ariel stepped inside and quietly shut the door behind her.

Now alone with Lionel, Ariel saw him curled up in a corner of the room.

She approached him slowly.

“Leave me alone. Just let me be...”

Lionel muttered dejectedly.

“I don't want to see anyone right now... I'm too humiliated...”

Ariel watched him silently.

His golden beard quivered slightly, pitifully.

“Damn it... Dragons aren't supposed to feel embarrassed about showing their bodies... It's natural... But everyone looked at me like I was weird. Especially *you*...”

Lionel raised his head, glaring at Ariel with a mixture of shame and indignation.

“Sorry.”

Ariel's voice was calm.

“I was just curious, that's all.”

“T-that's exactly what's embarrassing!”

Lionel's voice rose in frustration.

A moment of silence passed between them.

Then, Ariel spoke softly.

“I wasn’t looking at your body.”

“...What?”

Lionel frowned, confused.

“What do you mean? You were clearly staring at me—”

“What I saw was the greatness of a dragon.”

“...The greatness of a dragon?”

“Dragons are magnificent beings. That’s what I saw.”

“.....”

Lionel’s expression shifted, becoming more thoughtful.

After a moment, he nodded slowly.

“Well... Dragons *are* the most majestic creatures in existence. There’s no reason to be ashamed of showing our true forms. It’s natural. It’s... dignified.”

Confidence began to return to his face.

Ariel reached out and gently stroked his beard.

“That’s right. Don’t be ashamed. Be proud of who you are. You’re incredible, Lionel.”

Lionel smiled faintly.

“Thank you, Ariel...”

“It’s nothing.”

Lionel suddenly clapped his hands, his eyes lighting up with an idea.

“Then how about this? Let’s both embrace our true forms and celebrate our magnificence and beauty—”

“I’ll be going now.”

Without hesitation, Ariel turned and left the room.

Lu's Busy Days

Lately, Lu had been incredibly busy.

Thanks to the overwhelming success of [*Giants Are Alive*], he received invitations to numerous events:

Reader meet-and-greets, lectures, interviews, and more.

His popularity had skyrocketed after the exhibition.

— *Mr. Lu, we'd love for you to attend this weekend's literary festival!*

— *Lu, could you give a special lecture at our academy?*

— *When's your next book coming out?*

The constant attention and packed schedule kept Lu on his toes, but he didn't mind.

He was happy—thrilled, even—that so many people cared about his story.

Still, a part of him was worried.

How long will this popularity last?

He knew fame was fleeting, like a bubble waiting to burst. Eventually, people's interest in him would fade.

But he wanted to hold onto it just a little longer.

For a small fairy who had always been overlooked by other races, this newfound respect felt like a sweet dream.

People now called him *author* and *teacher* with genuine admiration.

Even Clara, Sion's younger sister, had once said:

— *Lu, your book has given the children at the orphanage courage and hope. Thank you so much for creating it.*

Lu bit his lip thoughtfully.

He couldn't just sit around.

I need to start working on my next book.

To maintain his momentum, he had to keep writing.
And to write another book, he'd need to embark on a new adventure.

People were already curious about his next destination.

— *Mr. Lu, where will your next adventure take you?*

Lu always gave vague answers like, "I'm still deciding," but the truth was, he hadn't thought about it at all.

Ariel had only recently returned from the North, and Lu had been busy with his current responsibilities.

Hmm...

It was time to start planning his next journey.

He decided to begin with research.

The Royal Library is supposed to have an enormous collection of books.

Located within the Imperial Palace, the Royal Library was said to house centuries' worth of knowledge and records.

Access was typically restricted to royalty, nobles, scholars, and high-ranking members of the Magic Tower and Cathedral.

But with Lu's connections, gaining entry shouldn't be a problem.

No, it was a certainty.

After all, Princess Iliana, Saint Levana, and Hero Sion were all his friends.

I'll go there.

Resolving himself, Lu got up to prepare.

The Ice Slide

The next morning, Ariel and Lakia were playing on the ice slide at Skadi's castle.

Originally, the slide was modest and simple, but Ariel had transformed it into something entirely new.

It now spanned the entire castle, featuring sharp curves, jumps, and spiraling sections.

Certain parts of the slide were enchanted to speed riders up, offering an exhilarating thrill from start to finish.

“Wheee!”

Lakia’s delighted screams echoed through the air.

“This is amazing, Lady Ariel!!”

Currently, Lakia was clinging tightly to Ariel as they zipped down the slide.

They sped through a sharp curve, spiraled down a twisting section, and passed through a bubble-shaped tunnel.

Then came a jump.

“Ahhh, Lady Ariel!!”

They soared through the air before landing smoothly on the slope, eventually splashing into a large ice pool at the end.

Whoosh!

Water sprayed everywhere as they landed.

Though drenched, Ariel and Lakia laughed in delight.

“Skadi, come join us!”

Lakia, dripping wet, approached Skadi, who was huddled in a corner of the castle with Ash and Sam.

Skadi had been carving small ice figurines of Ariel, Lakia, Levana, and Lu. Even the Demon King and the other generals were included.

“I-I’m not going,” Skadi said, shaking her head.

Just looking at the slide made her dizzy.

“Why did you change my slide like that?!”

“It’s way more fun now. Your original one was too boring.”

“B-boring?!”

Skadi pouted indignantly.

This was her castle, after all. She had the right to decide how things were built.

“I only invited Ash and Sam to my castle...”

She muttered under her breath, fiddling with one of the figurines.

While she wasn’t happy about Ariel and Lakia running wild in her castle, she couldn’t muster the courage to confront them.

Lakia was a powerful dragon, and Ariel was even stronger.

“Just... make sure to put it back the way it was later...”

“Sure, sure. But for now, why don’t you come enjoy the pool? It’s so refreshing!”

“What? No way. I don’t want to get wet—”

Before she could finish, Lakia scooped Skadi up in her arms.

Skadi’s eyes widened in alarm.

“W-wait! No! I don’t want to—”

“Ash, Sam, come on!”

With Skadi in her arms, Lakia strode confidently toward the pool. Ash bounded after her excitedly, while Sam hesitantly followed.

“Lady Ariel~ Come play with us!”

In the pool, Ariel was floating serenely, spinning like a top.

“N-no! I don’t want to get wet!”

Skadi squirmed and protested, but it was no use.

“Ahahaha!”

Lakia leaped into the pool, bringing Skadi with her.

Sploosh!

Chapter 153: The Royal Library

The interior of the Royal Library was awe-inspiring.

Perched on Levana's shoulder, Lu's eyes darted about excitedly.

"Wow, this place is incredible!"

His wings fluttered with exhilaration.

Endless rows of towering bookshelves filled the grand hall, each packed with volumes.

Some shelves reached so high they seemed to touch the ornate ceiling, requiring ladders to access the uppermost books—though that was no issue for a fairy like Lu.

"I've never seen so many books!"

It was a true repository of knowledge: ancient history, magic, geography, philosophy, art, culture, and countless adventure books—exactly what Lu was seeking.

"What do you think, Lu? Satisfied?"

Princess Iliana asked, her tone playful.

Lu grinned and nodded enthusiastically.

"Of course! Thank you, Iliana."

"Oh, please, don't mention it. I'm just eagerly waiting for your next book. So if there's anything you need, just let me know—I'll take care of it!"

"Um, me too..."

Clara spoke softly.

"The children at the orphanage are eagerly awaiting your next book, Lu. If there's anything I can do to help, just say the word...."

“Haha, don’t be like that, guys.”

Lu waved his hands dismissively.

“You’re putting too much pressure on me.”

Despite his words, a broad smile lit up his face.

Seeing this, Iliana, Clara, and Levana exchanged warm smiles of their own.

“No pressure, Lu. I just wanted you to know how much I truly love your work,” Iliana said sincerely.

Clara nodded in agreement.

“Exactly. Your stories are more than just adventures. Seeing the children at the orphanage light up while reading your books makes me so happy.”

Levana chimed in with a wry smile.

“Even Bishop Javier at the cathedral won’t stop talking about your book. He keeps saying it’s the epitome of adventure. Honestly, he’s been visiting my room at night, begging me to go on a journey with him. It’s a bit exhausting....”

Her words prompted quiet laughter from the group.

“Javier’s enthusiasm hasn’t waned a bit, has it?” Iliana said with a chuckle.

Although now a senior bishop, Javier had often encouraged Iliana as a child during his tenure as archbishop.

“I should visit him soon. Does he still carry that handmade weapon around?”

“Yes... He even sleeps with it,” Levana replied with a tired smile.

Iliana shook her head, amused.

“He always smacked me with that thing when I was younger....”

“Me too,” Levana admitted.

“Maybe he does it on purpose...”

Iliana and Levana shared a moment of mutual understanding, leaving Clara chuckling quietly beside them.

A few minutes later, Lu spoke up.

“Alright, everyone, take it easy. I’m going to browse the adventure section.”

“Good luck, Lu!”

“Have fun, Lu!”

“Take care, Lu!”

As Lu flitted toward the towering bookshelves, the others settled into a plush sofa nearby.

The library was utterly silent, save for the faint rustle of pages.

“So, what do you think about what I mentioned earlier?”

Iliana whispered conspiratorially to Clara and Levana.

“I mean the letter I got from Count Karl.”

Clara perked up.

“Oh, the one where he said he’d come visit you soon?”

“Yeah. Apparently, he needs to see me to settle his feelings. Maybe he’s finally letting go of that elf.”

“That elf... Who could she be?” Clara wondered aloud.

“No idea. If she managed to captivate Karl, she must be as beautiful as me,” Iliana said, a playful glint in her eye.

Clara raised an eyebrow.

“I heard Northern men value strength over beauty.”

“I know that too. But what kind of strength? Physical? Martial? Magical?”

Levana, listening quietly, mulled over the question.

Strength, martial skill, and magical prowess...

Iliana and Clara might not know the elf Karl admired, but Levana did.

It was impossible not to.

There was the matter of the ring—and more notably, Karl’s infamous outburst in Skadi’s ice cave:

— *Ariel, I love you!!*

But... what happened after that?

Levana's curiosity deepened.

The party had treated the event as an unspoken secret, never bringing it up. Ariel hadn't shown any reaction, and Karl had spent weeks sulking before finally returning to normal and writing to Iliana.

Did Ariel reject him? If so, how?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a gentle poke to her cheek.

"Levana, what are you thinking about?" Iliana asked teasingly.

"Oh."

Levana blinked, coming back to herself.

"Just... random things."

"You must have had a tough time up north," Iliana said.

"Facing someone as scary as the Lord of Frost can't have been easy."

"Well... it wasn't *that* bad..."

"Actually..." Clara spoke up.

"My brother won't say anything about the Lord of Frost either. No matter how much I ask about the battle, he just stays quiet."

"That's true," Iliana agreed.

"I thought he'd boast about the fight, but I haven't heard a thing. What happened, Levana? Was the Lord of Frost really that terrifying?"

"Um, well... kind of..."

Levana hesitated, struggling to find the right words, when someone approached them.

"What are you all talking about?"

It was Sion.

Iliana and Clara blinked in surprise.

“Oh my, Hero Sion! What brings you to the library?”

“Big Brother, why are you here?”

Sion scratched his head.

“Well, I heard everyone was coming here, so I thought I’d check it out. Maybe find a book to read.”

“Big Brother... Can you even read yet?”

“I can too! I’ve been learning!”

“Hmmm...”

Iliana narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“You look a little... dressed up today.”

Sion flinched.

“W-what do you mean?”

“You’re all spruced up. Your hair’s slicked back, and your outfit’s immaculate. You look ready for a formal ball!”

“I’m just trying to maintain a proper image! You’re the one who said heroes should always look presentable!”

“Sure, sure~ I bet all the young noblewomen will swoon when they see you~”

Sion’s face turned bright red, and he stammered incoherently.

Iliana and Clara giggled, while Levana offered a reassuring comment.

“Don’t tease him. He looks great.”

Though meant to help, her words only deepened Sion’s embarrassment. His face, now as red as a tomato, remained buried in his hands.

Just then, Lu returned, clutching a thick book. His wings fluttered excitedly.

“Guys, look at this! I’ve found something amazing!”

Everyone turned their attention to him.

“There’s a huge secret hidden in this book!”

The book Lu had found was titled [*Navigation Records of the Eastern Seas*].

“Look, these maps span different eras, and they detail every island in the sea.”

Lu flipped through the pages, pointing to specific maps.

“But here’s the weird part—there’s one island that keeps appearing and disappearing. At first, I thought it was just a mistake, but the pattern is consistent. Look at these maps.”

He laid them out.

“This map shows the island, but this one doesn’t. And if you trace the timeline, you’ll see the island appears every hundred years like clockwork.”

“So...”

Sion tilted his head.

“You’re saying this island shows up once every century?”

“Exactly. While other islands stay in the same place, this one only appears every hundred years. Even its name changes: Karibra, Eldera, Nimbria... What do you think?”

Everyone fell silent, exchanging uncertain glances.

If an island truly appeared and disappeared on a hundred-year cycle, it was an extraordinary discovery.

Chapter 154: Black Market

The destination for their next adventure had been decided: a mysterious island.

This island appeared and disappeared every hundred years, as if by magic.

Each time it was recorded on nautical charts, it had a different name. However, Lu decided to call it by the name from the most recent chart: *Karibra Island*.

The island's location was at the far eastern edge of the ocean, quite far from the mainland. According to navigation logs, it would take more than three weeks of sailing from the nearest port to reach it.

The chart bore several warnings near the island's location, such as "*Frequent Fog Zone*" and "*Beware of Unpredictable Currents*".

It was a thrilling destination for an adventure—remote, challenging, and shrouded in mystery.

Even better, the timing was perfect.

This was believed to be the year when Karibra Island would reappear.

"This is our golden opportunity, Sister!"

Lu buzzed with excitement, rubbing his tiny body against Ariel's cheek.

Ariel chuckled softly, brushing her hand over Lu's head.

"All right. Let's go there."

"Yesss! I'll get everything ready right away!"

This time, Lakia would be joining their adventure.

Ariel, Lakia, and Lu.

Unfortunately, Levana couldn't come along.

With the Hero Party officially formed and the looming threat of the Demon King's forces, Levana couldn't afford to leave.

As for Skadi, she had concocted every excuse imaginable to avoid joining.

She claimed she had to care for Ash and Sam or protect her ice fortress. In truth, she seemed simply too frightened to venture into unknown territory.

"What kind of Demon King's trusted general are you? You're just a scared little bunny!" Lakia taunted, but Skadi remained adamant.

"I don't care! I'm not taking one step outside!"

Just then, Lionel strolled into the room.

"Haha! Then stay here with me and enjoy the slide! It's amazing!"

"I"

Skadi flinched back, and Lakia scowled at her brother.

"Brother, for the love of the gods, put on some clothes!"

Since his conversation with Ariel, Lionel had made a dramatic change: he now refused to wear clothes at all.

He would stride about boldly, though his face would flush red whenever Ariel stared at him.

"Dragons don't wear clothes. That's why we're so confident."

"...Have you ever considered how uncomfortable it is for others to look at you?"

"Dragons don't care about such trivial things. That's why we're so confident."

"Haa..." Lakia sighed, resigned.

Nothing she said would get through to him.
He'd only learn his lesson when he inevitably ran into their mother, Elision, and faced her wrath.

"Now then, let's give this slide a whirl!"

Lionel gleefully sprinted toward the slide, completely naked.
Lakia shook her head in exasperation.

"Let's just ignore him."

Still, she was in high spirits.
At long last, she would be embarking on an adventure with Ariel and Lu.

Their plan was to travel eastward, purchase a ship at the port, and sail to the mysterious island.

The thought alone filled Lakia with excitement.

Meanwhile, Ariel had gone to the Black Market in the imperial capital to gather the funds they would need.
She promised to bring back some delicious treats.

"Hmm, while she's gone, I might as well enjoy the slide myself!"
Lakia grinned mischievously and turned to Skadi.

"Come on, Skadi! Let's ride the slide together. Did you know it's even more fun if you go down backward?"

"I-I'll pass...."

Black Market

Step by step, Ariel led Levana down a shadowy alleyway.

The narrow street exuded an ominous air.

Trash littered the ground, and suspicious-looking individuals loitered about.

Among them were vagrants in tattered clothing, thugs with facial

tattoos, and mysterious figures cloaked in black robes.

“Kehehe...”

“Snicker, snicker...”

A few of them sneered unsettlingly at Ariel and Levana but refrained from approaching.

“Ariel, where are we going?” Levana whispered nervously.

“This place feels... dangerous.”

She wasn’t worried for her safety; with Ariel around, she could venture anywhere in the world.

But as a saint, she felt it was utterly improper for her to be in such a place.

“Don’t worry. It’s all fake,” Ariel replied casually.

“Fake?” Levana echoed, confused.

Before she could press further, they stopped in front of a nondescript building.

Ariel entered without hesitation, descending a set of stairs.

“Wait, wait for me!” Levana called, hurrying after her.

The deeper they went, the louder the murmur of voices became.

Finally, they arrived at a vast underground space.

Levana’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“What is this place? It looks so... suspicious. Should we even be here?”

The dimly lit chamber was filled with people wearing animal masks, adding to the eerie atmosphere.

“Two guests?”

A man in a deer mask approached, his tone polite.

Ariel nodded, and he handed them masks—a rabbit mask for Ariel

and a squirrel mask for Levana.

Following Ariel's lead, Levana put on her mask.

"Ah! It's you! Long time no see! Do you have items to sell today?"
The man in the deer mask seemed to recognize Ariel.

She nodded again. "Yes."

"Right this way, then."

He led them to an area where goods were being inspected.
Men in crocodile and lion masks stood nearby.

"May we see the item you wish to sell?" the deer-masked man asked.

Ariel waved her hand, and with a shimmer of magic, a corpse
appeared on the ground.

"!!"

Levana jumped back in shock, while the masked men leaned in to
examine the body with intrigue.

It was the body of a stunningly beautiful woman, her neck bent at an
unnatural angle.

"Hoho, another demon? But not a succubus this time, I see."

"A Vampire Lord," Ariel replied coolly.

The men gasped in unison.

"A Vampire Lord! Incredible! Truly remarkable!"

Levana could only stare, speechless, at Ariel and the corpse.

"Ariel, this Vampire Lord... is it Katrina?"

"Yes."

"And you're going to *sell* her?"

Before Ariel could respond, there was a loud crack as Katrina's neck snapped back into place.

"Uwaaah!"

The masked men recoiled in shock as Katrina sat upright, scowling.

"...Ugh, what is this place? And what's with these weird masks?" Katrina grumbled, glancing around.

"I was starving, and now..."

She moved toward the deer-masked man.

But before she could reach him, Ariel immobilized her with telekinesis.

"You...!" Katrina's eyes widened as she recognized Ariel, even behind her rabbit mask.

"P-please," Katrina stammered desperately.

"Don't put me back in that place. I'll do anything you say. Just... not there again...."

Tears streamed down her face as she pleaded.

Ariel released her grip, and Katrina collapsed to the ground, sobbing.

"Behave, and you won't have to go back," Ariel said.

"O-okay... I'll behave...."

Ariel handed Katrina a small loaf of bread.

"Eat."

"...?"

Cautiously, Katrina took the bread and began to nibble.

Tears welled up again as the taste hit her.

"Sniff... it's delicious...."

As Katrina ate and cried, Ariel patted her back and handed her some

milk.

Watching this bizarre scene, Levana could only think one thing:

What kind of place have we come to?

Chapter 155: Selly

In the end, the only thing Ariel sold at the Black Market was the corpse of a gorilla-like monster she had defeated in the southern jungle ruins.

Although it was an unusual find and garnered moderate interest, it didn't elicit the same fervor as her previous sales, such as the succubus or the medusa.

The gorilla's corpse was purchased by a renowned chef, who didn't disclose his reasons for acquiring it.

Ariel stowed the earnings in her inventory, then left the Black Market with Levana and Katrina.

"Take care, and please visit us again!"

The Black Market staff gave Ariel their usual reverent treatment.

After all, bringing in monster corpses to sell was valuable enough, and Ariel's offerings were always in pristine condition.

Still, Ariel seemed unsatisfied.

With a slightly frustrated look, she addressed the staff.

"I'll bring something better next time."

After leaving the Black Market, Ariel stopped by *Delight* to enjoy some dessert and picked up food to bring back for Lakia. Levana, however, had to return to the cathedral for evening prayers.

Levana waved goodbye.

"See you tomorrow, Ariel."

"Goodbye."

Ariel waved back lightly.

Katrina bowed deeply at the waist, her posture unusually formal.
“Take care, Saintess.”

Although Levana was technically Katrina’s enemy as a member of the Hero Party, that didn’t matter at the moment.
Katrina, still terrified from her previous experiences, treated anyone connected to Ariel with utmost respect.

“Ah, yes... you too, Katrina. Please take care.”

A strange sight: a general of the Demon King’s army and a saintess bowing to each other politely.

It felt absurd, but Levana decided not to dwell on it.

Katrina was likely heading to the Evergreen Forest—a place so far removed from normalcy that it didn’t even feel real anymore.

A land where the lower half of a Demon King’s servant lay discarded, the Lord of Frost had built her ice fortress, and the occasional Dragon Lord repositioned flowers to prevent them from being trampled.

If the Demon King himself showed up to ride the ice slide, Levana doubted she’d even bat an eye at this point.

‘Honestly, that might not be so bad. If he’s playing around, there’d be no war, and peace could prevail.’

But Levana knew that day wasn’t today.
The war against the Demon King’s army had only just begun.

“I’m not riding this anymore! It’s too scary!”

Skadi wriggled in Lakia’s arms, trying to escape.
But Lakia held on tight, hauling her back up to the top of the ice slide.

“Hehe, what if we make it even faster this time? That’d be so much fun—”

“Waaaaah!”

Finally, Skadi burst into tears.

Startled, Lakia set her down at once.

Skadi’s rabbit ears drooped miserably as frosty tears fell to the ground.

“F-Fine! I won’t make you ride it again. Sorry, Skadi.”

Lakia awkwardly patted Skadi’s head, mimicking how Ariel often comforted others.

Still, Skadi glared at Lakia with red-rimmed eyes, sniffing loudly.

“Y-You never listen... I said I didn’t want to....”

“How about this, then? Let’s play with those ice sculptures you made!”

“B-But you broke them yesterday....”

“Oh... yeah, that was an accident. I didn’t realize they were so fragile. Let’s rebuild them together, okay?”

Creeeak.

The sound of the ice fortress’s door opening drew their attention. Ariel had returned.

“Ariel’s back!” Lakia said hurriedly, quickly wiping Skadi’s tears away. Ariel didn’t like it when Skadi cried.

Skadi, however, suddenly began wailing even louder.

“Waaaaah!”

“W-What? Skadi, you were fine a moment ago! Are you doing this on purpose...?”

“Waaaaah!!”

Ariel’s gaze shifted toward them, making Lakia break into a nervous smile.

“Haha, Ariel, I swear I didn’t make her cry! She said the slide was scary, and then—”

“...Skadi?”

Katrina, standing beside Ariel, interrupted.

Skadi froze mid-sob, her teary eyes wide with surprise.

“!”

Without a word, Skadi conjured a gleaming suit of silver armor from ice and grasped her weapon, Niberion, in hand. She immediately reverted to her usual imposing demeanor.

“...Katrina, you survived.”

“And you, Lady Skadi, are also safe.”

“...Yes.”

An awkward silence fell between them.

The last time they had spoken was the night before the war.

At the time, Skadi had said:

— *The Hero Party will be my responsibility. I’m counting on you and Helpspawn for the rest.*

She had never imagined they’d lose the war, let alone meet again in such circumstances.

‘She was crying just now....’

Katrina, still reeling from the sight, struggled to suppress a smile.

Of course, Katrina had always known about Skadi’s true form as a cute rabbit-like demi-human. But Skadi hated having it acknowledged.

The Demon King had even instructed his subordinates to act intimidated around Skadi at all times, a role Katrina and Helpspawn played dutifully.

Now, however, Katrina had seen something truly rare: Skadi, crying her heart out in her most vulnerable state.

'She's... just so adorable!'

Katrina clenched her hands, resisting the urge to hug Skadi and stroke her ears.

Although such actions would undoubtedly provoke Skadi's wrath, she couldn't help but think:

'I need to protect this!'

The next morning, everyone gathered to see off Ariel, Lu, and Lakia.

Levana, Lionel, Skadi, Katrina, the wolf pup Ash, and the bear cub Sam.

Even Ghost and Black had emerged from the depths of the forest for the occasion.

Ariel glanced around at the group, her gaze lingering on each face.

When had her circle of companions grown so large?

Every one of them was a bond forged through her adventures, and each one was precious to her.

"Take care, everyone."

Ariel smiled faintly.

"We'll be back soon."

Flash!

In an instant, Ariel, Lu, and Lakia disappeared.

They reappeared at the base of the Kryn frost Mountains, where Elision's lair lay hidden.

From here, they would travel on foot.

Although it would have been faster to teleport directly to the eastern port and procure a ship for their journey to the island, Ariel had someone she wanted to meet first.

A promise made during her time in the city of Sierra:

— *Next time, you have to visit our manor... It's the Matiel family, in the East... Don't forget....*

Selly, the young girl from the Matiel family.

Their first meeting had been brief but memorable, involving strawberry tarts, arm-wrestling, and goldfish-catching games at a festival.

Though Ariel could no longer clearly recall Selly's face—she had met so many people since then—she had never forgotten her promise to visit.

Now, with their journey taking them eastward, it seemed like the perfect time to fulfill it.

At the Matiel manor's gate, Sir Loren stood guard with a somber expression.

It was a bright, sunny morning, but the atmosphere at the manor was heavy and tense.

'How did it come to this...?'

Suddenly, two figures approached from the distance: a silver-haired girl and a blonde girl dressed in a bunny costume.

"Halt!" Loren called weakly, stepping forward.

Normally, Loren would have smiled at the sight of such adorable visitors.

But today was different.

“This is the Matiel estate. What is your business here?”

The silver-haired girl glanced up, and from beneath her hat, a tiny figure with wings fluttered into view.

“We’ve come to see a girl named Selly, human.”

“...?”

Loren blinked in confusion.

The speaker was none other than the tiny winged creature—an actual fairy.

‘A fairy?’

Though he found it fascinating, Loren quickly steeled his expression.

“You wish to see Lady Selly?”

Inadvertently, a sharp aura of hostility emanated from him.

It wasn’t intentional, but Loren’s honed instincts as a knight made the air around him heavy with tension.

Ordinary people would have been overwhelmed, trembling or even collapsing in fear.

But the two girls before him remained utterly unfazed.

“That’s correct, human,” the girl in the bunny suit replied coolly.

“And if you dare direct such a pitiful display of intimidation at us again, I will turn you to ash.”

Her golden eyes gleamed with a chilling light.

Chapter 156: An Important Guest

“!”

Loren instinctively took a step back and gripped the hilt of his sword, ready to draw it at a moment's notice.

It was an automatic reaction—he felt threatened by Lakia's chilling aura.

“.....”

But Loren quickly realized his mistake. His grip loosened, and an embarrassed expression crossed his face.

What am I doing?

She was just a child, no older than Selly. How could he feel threatened by someone so young?

It was clear that the stress surrounding Selly had left him on edge.

“...I apologize.”

Loren bowed slightly in apology, to which Lakia responded with a smug grin.

“Hmm, good instincts. If you'd drawn your sword, you'd already be...”

“Did something happen to Selly?”

Ariel's worried voice interrupted, her eyes narrowing.

Loren's reaction when they mentioned Selly made it obvious that something had happened.

Loren sighed deeply.

"It's not something I can discuss with outsiders. What I can tell you is that Selly is unavailable right now."

"....."

Ariel stared at him, her expression calm yet piercing.

Loren's face betrayed a deep sadness—his drooping eyebrows, tightly pressed lips, and trembling shoulders spoke volumes.

"I'm her friend," Ariel said quietly.

"If she's in trouble, I want to help."

Loren let out a faint, bitter laugh.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but this is a delicate matter. It must remain confidential, so I ask for your understanding..."

"Hmm?"

Before Loren could finish, a voice called out from behind him.

It belonged to a purple-haired woman carrying a large staff.

"Wait... could it be? Ariel?"

The woman's surprised gaze settled on the silver-haired elf.

Her name was **Pamelia**, a mage from the Matiel family and Selly's personal guard.

"Yes, it's you! The elf girl Selly befriended in Sierra!"

Pamelia seemed to recognize Ariel immediately, but Ariel tilted her head in confusion.

"Who...?"

Pamelia stepped closer, a warm smile on her face.

"We met briefly in Sierra. I'm Pamelia, Selly's mage and bodyguard. Don't you remember?"

"....."

Ariel frowned slightly, clearly trying to recall the encounter.

Pamelia chuckled softly.

“It’s okay if you don’t remember. It was a short meeting, after all. But since you’re here, why don’t you come inside?”

She turned to Loren.

“Sir Loren, this girl is an important guest of Lady Selly. Please let them in.”

In the elegant parlor of the Matiel family’s manor, Ariel, Lakia, and Lu sat on a luxurious sofa.

Pamelia observed Ariel thoughtfully.

She hasn’t changed at all.

The last time Pamela saw Ariel was in Sierra, where Selly had cried her heart out when it was time to part ways.

Despite being the same age as Selly, Ariel had remained calm and composed, comforting Selly without showing the slightest emotional shift.

At the time, Pamela had felt an odd sense of unease about Ariel, and now, sitting face to face with her again, she couldn’t help but notice it once more. Ariel’s expression was as blank as ever, like a doll’s.

Pamelia spoke up.

“Selly has been waiting for you every day. She’d talk about how she’d show you the garden and share delicious meals with you. She never stopped mentioning you, not even once.”

It was thanks to Selly’s constant chatter that Pamela remembered Ariel so well.

“If she knew you were here, she would’ve been overjoyed. She’s been longing to see you. But...”

Pamelia’s expression darkened.

“Something bad has happened to her.”

Ariel's face remained unreadable, but there was a flicker of concern in her golden eyes.

Pamelia sighed and continued.

"Yesterday, Selly was ambushed in the forest."

Tension filled the room.

"Ambushed...?" Ariel asked in a low voice.

"Does that mean she's... dead?"

Her gaze dropped, her voice calm but heavy.

"No! She's alive," Pamelia quickly clarified, shaking her head.

"But... she's been kidnapped."

The northern region of the Empire was ruled by the Castark family, while the western region belonged to the Baraton family.

In the east, two major families vied for power: the Matiel family and the Bolton family.

For decades, these two eastern families had clashed over control of the coastline. The coastline was a gateway to vast maritime resources and significant profits.

Recently, a rare mineral known as *Aquamarine* was discovered in the ocean, intensifying the conflict.

Military skirmishes had become commonplace, and in the midst of this turmoil, Selly's kidnapping occurred.

"We suspect the Bolton family is behind it," Pamelia said grimly.

"They likely want to use her as leverage to force the Matiel family to relinquish control of the coastline."

Pamelia's tone grew bitter.

"They've used similar tactics before. Thirty years ago, the Matiel family's heir disappeared—a seven-year-old child. For three months, the family searched desperately while chaos engulfed the region. During that time, the Bolton family seized control of key ports along

the coast.”

She clenched her fists in anger.

“It was later discovered that the Boltons had kidnapped the child and hidden him away.”

Lu’s small voice broke the heavy silence.

“That’s horrible...”

Lakia’s expression hardened, her brows furrowed in disgust.

Pamelia nodded.

“Even after the child was rescued, he was deeply traumatized. He had been confined in a dark basement, given barely enough food and water to survive. No one spoke to him except to frighten him with harsh words and terrifying sounds. He endured extreme isolation and fear.”

Pamelia paused, her eyes softening.

“He suffered for a long time, but eventually, he healed. That child is now Selly’s father, Lord Philip of the Matiel family.”

She exhaled heavily.

“Lord Philip is terrified that Selly is going through the same thing he did as a child. I think he’s prepared to surrender the coastline just to ensure her safety.”

Lu frowned.

“But if you give in, won’t that just let those scumbags win?”

“Exactly,” Lakia said firmly, her golden eyes glinting.

“I hate cowards like that. They deserve to be turned to ash.”

Pamelia blinked, taken aback by Lakia’s intense demeanor.

“...And... who is this?”

The mage couldn’t help but glance at Lakia’s unusual attire—a worn-out bunny costume—and wonder if the headpiece was missing.

Before she could dwell on the thought, Ariel rose to her feet.

Lu perched on Ariel’s shoulder, and Lakia grinned, stepping beside

her.

“Where are you going?” Pamela asked hesitantly.

Ariel’s calm voice cut through the air.

“We’re bringing Selly back.”

Pamela stammered.

“B-Bringing her back? But you don’t even know where she—”

Before she could finish, the three vanished in a flash of light.

Left alone in the parlor, Pamela stared blankly at the empty space where they’d stood.

“That... was teleportation magic....”

Teleportation was a spell so advanced that even elite mages struggled to perform it. Ariel had executed it effortlessly.

“Who... is that elf?”

For a long while, Pamela sat lost in thought, unable to make sense of the enigmatic girl.

Chapter 157: A Dishonorable Act

Inside the Bolton family's stronghold, dim lantern light fought back the darkness in the study. Seated behind an ornate desk was **Sven Bolton**, the family patriarch.

Despite being in his mid-sixties, Sven carried himself with a commanding presence. His back was straight, and his sharp gaze still exuded the confidence of his youth.

Sven studied a detailed map laid out on his desk. The territories of the Matiel and Bolton families were marked clearly, their contested boundaries a source of constant friction.

Knock, knock.

"Enter," Sven called without looking up.

The door creaked open, and a young man in his early thirties stepped inside. It was **Roderick Bolton**, Sven's son and the Bolton family's heir.

Roderick offered a respectful bow.

"Father."

"What is it?" Sven asked, his voice steady.

"Are you aware that the youngest daughter of the Matiel family has been kidnapped?"

"I am."

"They say a dark sorcerer was involved in her abduction. Did you know that as well?"

“Yes.”

Sven leaned back in his chair, turning his cold gaze toward Roderick.

The room fell silent before Roderick spoke cautiously.

“Father... is our family involved in this?”

Sven’s expression didn’t waver.

“Why do you ask?”

“Recently, I saw a suspicious old man in black robes wandering the castle grounds. I heard he was brought here under your orders. Is he... a dark sorcerer?”

Sven nodded curtly.

“Your observations are correct. His name is **Kaiden**, and I hired him for this task.”

Roderick’s face turned pale.

“Then... does that mean you’re behind the kidnapping of Selly Matiel?”

“Yes.”

Roderick’s jaw tightened, his fists clenching at his sides.

“Father, using a dark sorcerer to abduct a child... is that really necessary?”

Sven’s voice turned icy.

“Sometimes extreme measures are required.”

Roderick looked heartbroken as he replied.

“...Thirty years ago, our family used similar tactics to seize control of the eastern ports. We kidnapped a seven-year-old child—a dishonorable act.”

“Dishonorable?”

A cold smile played across Sven’s lips.

“That so-called dishonorable act is the reason we enjoy our current prosperity. Without it, do you think we’d be where we are today?”

Roderick bowed his head, his voice trembling.

“...The child we kidnapped—Philip Matiel—suffered severe trauma for years.”

Sven’s eyes narrowed as he leaned forward.

“Good. That trauma has stayed with him. Because of it, he will surrender the eastern coast to protect his daughter from experiencing the same pain.”

“.....”

“Roderick,” Sven continued, his tone firm.

“Honor means nothing if you don’t survive to enjoy it. Only the victors have the privilege of claiming honor. We will secure control of the eastern coast. With it, we’ll establish ourselves as the dominant power in the region, like the Castarks in the north or the Baratons in the west.”

Roderick said nothing, but his thoughts were conflicted.

Do we really need to stoop this low to claim power?

Couldn’t we find a peaceful solution?

With the demon army on the rise, shouldn’t we focus on unity, not rivalry?

“.....”

But Roderick knew his father wouldn’t listen to such reasoning. Sven was consumed by his obsession with dominance.

Roderick sighed quietly.

“...Where is Selly Matiel being held?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“She’s done nothing wrong. She’s just a child. There’s no need to harm her. We could keep her safe while still achieving our goal.”

Sven’s expression hardened.

“Roderick, if you continue spouting such nonsense, how can I trust you to lead this family? Thirty years ago, if we’d treated Philip kindly, do you think he would have hesitated to retaliate? Fear, not

anger, kept him in check.”

“.....”

Knock, knock.

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation.

“Who is it?” Sven asked sharply.

— “My lord, we’ve received a message from the Matiel family.”

Sven stood abruptly, a triumphant smile spreading across his face.

“Ha! They’ve caved already.”

In a dark, cold cell, **Selly Matiel** sat curled up on the floor, trembling like a fragile bird.

It’s okay... I’m not scared... I’m not scared...

Despite her best efforts, fear gnawed at her resolve.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she hugged her knees tightly.

“Sniff... sniff...”

She wondered where Pamela and Loren were.

Was her father looking for her?

Her mind replayed the terrifying moment of her abduction.

It had happened so suddenly, while she was traveling by carriage through the forest.

A black fog had enveloped the area.

“Protect the young lady!” Loren’s desperate shout rang out, followed by the clash of steel and the sound of magic spells being cast.

Selly had sat trembling inside the carriage until the door flung open and Pamela extended her hand.

“Young lady, run!”

Selly grabbed Pamela's hand, and together they fled into the forest.

But something had felt strange.

Pamela's hand was too cold.

Selly glanced up and froze in horror.

The person holding her hand wasn't Pamela—it was a wrinkled old man with sunken eyes.

“Noticed, have you?”

His voice was like nails on a chalkboard.

Before Selly could pull away, the old man muttered an incantation, and everything went black.

Now, in the cell, Selly clenched her fists.

Her father had always told her to stop when fearful thoughts overwhelmed her and take action.

Maybe I can escape...

Her eyes fell on a small window high up on the wall. It was her only hope.

As she scanned the room for something to climb on, the sound of a lock turning froze her in place.

Creak.

The heavy iron door swung open, and a young man stepped inside.

“Ah, there you are,” he said gently.

“Are you okay?”

Selly's body stiffened as she eyed him warily.

“W-Who are you?”

“I'm Roderick Bolton, the heir to the Bolton family.”

Selly gasped.

“Bolton... Why did you imprison me? I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Roderick shook his head.

“You’ve done nothing wrong. This is just the result of the greed of those in power. I’m sorry.”

He stepped closer.

“I’ll take you back to your family. This is no place for you.”

Just then, a voice rasped from the doorway.

“...That won’t be happening.”

Roderick spun around, Selly clinging to his coat.

Standing in the doorway was the hunched figure of **Kaiden**, the dark sorcerer.

“You dare to interfere?” Roderick said, attempting to sound confident.

Kaiden laughed darkly.

“Do you think I care who you are, boy? Your family is doomed. Soon, so will this entire empire.”

He pointed a gnarled finger at Selly.

“Thanks to her.”

Selly blinked in confusion.

“Me?”

Kaiden sneered.

“She is the vessel. A pure body, an untainted soul... perfect for awakening the great god of terror and blood, **Naxxis**.”

Chapter 158: Resurrection

Roderick whispered resolutely to Selly, clutching her trembling hand tightly.

“Never let go of my hand.”

Selly nodded, her trust in him overshadowed by fear, and together they bolted from the dark room.

Thud!

Standing in their way was Kaiden, his hunched figure exuding malice. But Roderick didn't hesitate.

“RAAAAH!”

With a guttural cry, he charged forward, intent on forcing a path through sheer determination.

“Futile,” Kaiden muttered, raising his hand.

Dark energy surged forth like a wave, consuming the air with malevolent power.

CRASH!

Roderick and Selly were flung backward, slamming into the cold stone wall.

Thud!

The impact knocked the breath out of Roderick, but his body cushioned Selly's fall. He groaned in pain, blood dripping from his mouth, but even then, he turned to Selly.

“Don't... worry,” he rasped, his voice barely audible.

“I... will protect you. I'll get you back... to your family....”

Selly blinked, her tears falling freely now. She wanted to scream, “*You’re too weak!*” but swallowed her words. He was fighting for her, and that meant everything.

Kaiden’s low laughter echoed through the room.
“So weak,” he sneered.

Selly glared at him, anger momentarily overpowering her fear.
“Roderick is stronger than you’ll ever be!”

Kaiden tilted his head mockingly.
“The man who’s already unconscious?”

Selly’s heart sank as she glanced at Roderick. He was indeed still, his head slumped to the side.

“Stay back!” she shouted, backing away. “I won’t be your vessel!”

Kaiden grinned, malice dripping from his every word.
“Your will is irrelevant.”

He began chanting, his voice an eerie whisper that filled the room like a suffocating fog.

Whoosh.

Dark mist enveloped Selly, lifting her small body into the air.

“Stop! Let me go!” Selly screamed, struggling against the invisible chains that bound her.

Her cries were ignored. The mist grew denser, pressing down on her with an almost tangible weight.

“It hurts....” Selly whimpered, tears streaming down her cheeks.
“It HURTS!”

Her scream pierced the air, but Kaiden’s chanting grew louder, his voice trembling with excitement.

The mist swirled faster, tightening around Selly as her eyes widened in agony. Her small body was engulfed entirely in darkness, and her

screams faded.

Kaiden's breath hitched as he watched. His bloodshot eyes gleamed with unholy fervor.

"Finally... the great Naxis shall rise...."

Not long ago, Kaiden had a dream.

A deep, otherworldly voice had echoed through his mind.

— Aid my resurrection.

Kaiden had been paralyzed with fear.

"Who... who speaks to me?"

— I am Naxis, god of chaos and ruin. You have been chosen as my servant. Fulfill your purpose and I shall reward you.

Kaiden knew of Naxis—how could he not? The ancient god who had once plunged the continent into bloodshed. To be addressed by such a being was both terrifying and exhilarating.

— What must I do, my lord?

The voice was accompanied by a shadowy figure, enormous but incomplete. Its upper body loomed over Kaiden like a living nightmare.

— I require a vessel. One with a pure soul and an unblemished body. Find such a vessel and offer it to me. Through it, I shall rise again.

Kaiden had devoted himself to the task, sacrificing countless individuals in his search. But each attempt ended in failure.

— Worthless! Another failure! Find me a proper vessel!

The god's ire had pushed Kaiden to desperation. His fervor grew with every rejection, and his determination to appease Naxis bordered on madness.

Eventually, he found her—Selly Matiel, the youngest daughter of the Matiel family.

— At last... this one shall suffice. You've done well, my servant. Prepare for my return.

Now, in the center of the swirling dark mist, Selly's eyes glowed crimson. Her body shuddered as tendrils of shadow coiled around her, seeping into her skin.

Kaiden cackled maniacally.

"He awakens!"

The mist abruptly stilled, the room plunging into eerie silence.

"...Hehehe."

A chilling laugh escaped Selly's lips, but it was no longer her voice. It was deep, resonant, and filled with malice.

"I have returned...."

The voice of Naxis rumbled from Selly's small body.

Her movements were slow and deliberate as she descended to the ground. Her presence was suffocating, her crimson eyes piercing through the shadows.

Kaiden dropped to his knees, trembling with awe.

"My lord, you have graced us with your presence once more!"

Naxis, inhabiting Selly's form, gazed down at him.

"This body is frail. My power is incomplete."

Kaiden's voice quivered.

"What must I do to aid you, my lord? Command me."

Naxis reached out, his fingers brushing against Kaiden's face. The dark god's touch sent a shiver down the sorcerer's spine.

"My strength shall return through chaos and despair," Naxis

murmured.

“Guide me to the humans. Their suffering will feed me.”

Kaiden’s lips twisted into a grin.

“As you wish, my lord. I shall bring you to the heart of the empire.”

Meanwhile, in Sven Bolton’s study, the patriarch swirled his glass of fine wine, savoring his victory.

“Soon, the Matiel family will be no more,” he muttered, a smirk playing on his lips.

Knock, knock.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts.

“Enter,” he called, but the door swung open before he gave permission.

Sven turned, his glass still in hand, and froze.

Standing in the doorway were two figures: a silver-haired elf and a girl in a shabby rabbit costume.

Sven’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“Who are you, and how dare you—”

“Oi,” the girl interrupted, crossing her arms.

“You the one in charge here?”

Her cocky tone made Sven’s blood boil.

“Do you even know where you are—”

“Oh wow!” A high-pitched voice chirped.

Sven’s gaze darted to a small figure hovering near his wine bottle. It was a fairy, inspecting the contents with curious delight.

“This wine looks fancy! Can I try it?”

Sven’s eyes bulged in horror.

“That’s—”

Glug, glug.

The fairy tilted the bottle, gulping down the precious liquid as Sven watched in stunned silence.

Chapter 159: The Mage

Ariel, determined to find Selly, had reached the gates of the Bolton estate. Standing there was a towering knight named Ron, who squinted at the small figure before him.

When Ariel requested an audience with Sven Bolton, Ron laughed mockingly.

“Our lord doesn’t meet with brats like you. Run along, little girl, before I give you a lesson in respect.”

Ariel remained unfazed, her calm demeanor unshaken by Ron’s threats. She had anticipated this reaction.

Before Ariel could respond, Lakia interrupted, her voice laced with indignation and an edge of embarrassment.

“Excuse me! No one gets to discipline Ariel’s backside—except maybe me...”

Her eyes darted briefly to Ariel’s lower half, a curious spark flickering in her gaze. Ariel shot her a glance, and Lakia immediately turned red, redirecting her ire at Ron.

“You insolent human! Summon Sven Bolton at once!”

Lakia’s shout carried both authority and irritation.

Ron chuckled, taking a step forward.

“You’re bold, little ones. But it’s time someone put you in your place. It’ll be my pleasure—”

He reached out, only to be struck by an invisible force.

Boom!

Lakia’s wind magic hurled Ron into the stone wall with a deafening crash.

“Intruders!” he bellowed, trying to rise, his voice echoing through the estate.

Soldiers immediately surrounded Ariel and Lakia, their spears and crossbows aimed and ready. From the walls, archers took their positions, locking onto the two girls below.

Ron wiped blood from his lip as he staggered to his feet, barking orders.

“Capture those brats! Do it now!”

The soldiers prepared to strike—but they didn’t move. Not an inch.

Time seemed to freeze as weapons floated from the soldiers’ hands, drifting toward Ariel. The blades and arrows vanished into thin air, leaving the soldiers unarmed and immobilized, unable to move as though an invisible hand held them in place.

Ron stared in disbelief, his voice caught in his throat.

“W-what is this sorcery...?”

Tap, tap.

The sound of approaching footsteps echoed in the silent courtyard. Ariel and Lakia advanced toward Ron.

Ariel’s quiet, steady voice broke the tension.

“I need to meet Sven Bolton.”

Ron forced a scoff, his pride faltering under the eerie display of power.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at, but this is the Bolton estate. Do you think you can—”

Boom!

Before he could finish, another gust of wind magic slammed him into the wall. Blood dripped from his armor as he groaned in pain, struggling to rise.

“Enough!” Ron yelled, desperation creeping into his voice.

“I’ll... I’ll take you to him! Just stop!”

Inside the Bolton estate, Sven Bolton stood in his study, gripping his sword tightly. His gaze darted to the petite elf girl and her strange companions, who had so audaciously invaded his stronghold.

Sven was not a man easily rattled, but the situation called for caution. His cold eyes studied Ariel and Lakia, noting the air of confidence surrounding them.

“Who are you?” he demanded, his voice as sharp as steel. “What do you want?”

Ariel stepped forward, her expression unchanging.
“We’re here for Selly Matiel.”

The name pierced through Sven’s composure. He considered lying but quickly dismissed the idea. Ariel’s unyielding gaze and the palpable sense of danger she radiated told him such a ploy would not end well.

“Fine,” Sven said at last, his tone calculated.
“She’s being held in the estate’s dungeons. I’ll take you to her myself.”

Ariel lowered her hand, releasing the telekinetic grip she’d held over Sven’s body. He adjusted his collar, masking his relief with a composed facade.

As Sven led them down the corridor, he subtly signaled his guards. They would regroup and corner the intruders before they reached the dungeons.

Sven’s plan seemed to bear fruit as armored footsteps thundered toward them. The estate’s knights, led by their imposing captain, Maxwell, filled the hallway.

Maxwell, a mountain of a man clad in enchanted armor, drew his massive greatsword and approached Ariel and Lakia. His voice boomed through the hall.

“I am Maxwell, captain of the Bolton knights. You will not leave this

place alive.”

Ariel’s silver eyes met his, calm and calculating. She reached out, and from the empty air, a hilt formed in her hand. Slowly, a massive, ethereal blade emerged, its surface shimmering with ancient runes.

Maxwell’s breath hitched as he took in the sight of Ariel’s weapon.
“What... is that?”

“Ragnarök,” Ariel said simply, her voice quiet but firm.

Maxwell’s lips tightened, his grip on his greatsword firm.
“A mage... wielding a blade like that?”

Ariel stepped forward, the ground seeming to ripple beneath her feet as the blade’s energy pulsed.

“Magician or swordsman,” she said, her tone unwavering. “It doesn’t matter. You will move.”

Beside her, Lakia smirked, lightning crackling in her palm.
“Or we’ll make you.”

Maxwell’s knights shifted nervously, the weight of Ariel’s words and presence pressing down on them like an unseen force.

Maxwell, however, gritted his teeth and raised his blade, unwilling to back down.
“Then prove it, mage.”

With a flash of steel and magic, the battle began.

Chapter 160: Reunion

Thump.

Ariel lightly pushed off the ground.

In an instant, Ariel's figure left behind an afterimage and vanished.

“!”

Maxwell quickly scanned his surroundings.

To the right, to the left—she was nowhere to be found.

Then,

Above?

Maxwell lifted his head, and only then did he see Ariel.

Her soft, silver hair fluttered gently.

Her face looked relaxed, almost indifferent.

Falling from above, Ariel swung *Ragnarok* down toward Maxwell.

Maxwell hastily raised his greatsword to block.

BANG!

With a thunderous impact, Maxwell's massive frame was pushed back several meters.

What... what is this...?!

Shock flashed across Maxwell's face.

Until now, he had never been overpowered in terms of strength.

In battle, he always overwhelmed his opponents with brute force, earning him the nickname “Tyrant Maxwell.”

But now, Tyrant Maxwell’s arms were trembling violently. He had used all his strength to block Ariel’s attack.

Even with all his strength, he had been pushed back several meters. Maxwell couldn’t believe it.

“You’re... you’re not a mage, are you?”

Maxwell asked again. There hadn’t been any trace of magic in Ariel’s previous attack.

It was purely a clash of physical strength.

“I am a mage,” Ariel replied.

Her voice was low and monotone. It carried no hint of tension, as if this were all trivial to her.

“.....”

Maxwell gritted his teeth. He thought Ariel was mocking him.

It was impossible for a mage to move with such agility or possess such immense strength.

“How dare you mock me, Tyrant Maxwell!”

Maxwell’s massive figure surged forward with frightening speed.

Whoosh!

His greatsword swept through the air with destructive force. Even though he had expended all his strength, Maxwell’s attack still carried devastating power.

But Ariel simply stepped back, and Maxwell’s greatsword sliced through empty air, not even grazing the hem of her clothes.

“.....”

A hollow expression spread across Maxwell's face.

She had dodged his full-strength attack as if it were nothing.

He tried to steady his breathing and muster his strength again, but his body had already reached its limit.

The greatsword, which he normally wielded with ease, now felt as heavy as lead.

Watching Maxwell struggle, Ariel calmly raised *Ragnarok*.

A firm resolve appeared on her face, as if she had decided to end this trivial fight.

“.....”

Fear seeped into Maxwell's eyes.

He trembled helplessly, like a prisoner awaiting judgment, and asked,

“What... what are you? You can't possibly be a mage...”

Ariel answered in a composed voice.

“I am a mage.”

She brought *Ragnarok* down.

Sven was a cold, calculating individual.

No matter the situation, he responded calmly, suppressing his emotions and acting rationally.

But now, Sven couldn't maintain his composure.

Maxwell, whom he had relied on, had been effortlessly defeated by Ariel.

The elite knights of the Bolton family, their key force, had been completely overwhelmed by Lakia's lightning magic.

Fear began to take root in Sven's heart.

Calm down...

He took a deep breath, his face slick with cold sweat.

He had to regain his composure to think of a way out of this situation.

All the Bolton family's knights lay defeated around him, while Ariel and Lakia steadily approached him.

Sven forced a calm expression and addressed them:

"Very well, let us proceed. I will guide you to the mansion's underground."

Sven turned and began walking as if nothing had happened.

"...That guy's pretty shameless, isn't he?"

"He was so smug when the knights arrived earlier,"

Lakia and Lu whispered behind him, but Sven pretended not to hear.

He walked with his back straight, eyes fixed forward. Of course, his mind was racing.

With the Bolton family's forces neutralized, the only one left was Cayden.

But could Cayden defeat Ariel and Lakia?

Sven shook his head.

Impossible.

No matter how powerful a dark mage Cayden was, he couldn't possibly prevail against someone who had obliterated the Bolton family's forces.

Do I have no choice but to hand over Selly Martiel?

If he surrendered Selly, the situation would resolve easily.

Ariel hadn't taken Maxwell's life earlier.

Even though Maxwell's greatsword and armor had been shattered into dust by Ariel's strike, he had barely survived.

The knights struck down by Lakia's lightning magic were only unconscious, not dead.

In other words, surrendering Selly would likely spare Sven's own life.

But...

If he did, he would lose the chance to control the eastern coast.

The contract had burned to ashes.

Sven's expression twisted in frustration.

Damn it, why did they have to show up now...?

He had been so close to seizing the east, only for everything to fall apart like this.

Reaching the entrance to the underground chamber, Sven stopped and turned to Ariel and Lakia.

"Selly Martiel is down there."

At his words, Ariel and Lakia started to move toward the underground entrance.

"...Wait."

Sven stepped in front of them, blocking their path.

"Before you take her, I have a proposal."

"?"

Ariel and Lakia paused and looked at Sven.

Sven spoke in a steady voice.

"If you don't take her immediately, I will grant you power."

“Power?” Lakia tilted her head.

“What kind of power?”

“I will grant you dominion over half the eastern lands.
Once I control the east, I can make it happen.
What do you say?”

Sven directed his words at Ariel, realizing she held the authority to decide.

Lakia and Lu seemed to follow Ariel’s lead.

But Ariel showed no interest.

She simply stared at Sven in silence.

Feeling increasingly anxious, Sven continued:

“I have no intention of harming Selly Martiel.
I only wish to keep her briefly.

If you want, you may stay with her.
I’ll provide accommodations and the finest treatment.”

At that moment, Ariel’s expression shifted slightly.

Her crimson eyes widened ever so slightly.

Sven took it as a good sign.

Of course.

Sven felt a wave of relief.
Who could refuse power?

Half the eastern lands was a tempting offer for anyone.

Of course, Sven had no intention of keeping his promise.
He just needed to buy time.

Once he secured control of the eastern coast, he would figure out a way to deal with Ariel and Lakia.

“Once I gain control of the eastern coast, I’ll release Selly Martiel. Afterward, I will...”

Thud!

Sven’s eyes widened in shock.

A pale, slender hand had pierced through his body.

“Are you afraid, human?”

A sinister voice echoed behind him...

Chapter 161: Cayden

Step, step.

Two shadows moved down a dim corridor.

Leading the way was a small, frail girl—Selly’s body, now possessed by Naxxis.

Trailing behind was an old man with a hunched back—the dark mage, Cayden.

Heh heh...

Cayden’s eyes gleamed with excitement.

The world will soon meet its end. Lord Naxxis has awakened...

Cayden had long desired the world’s destruction.
His reasons were rooted in his miserable past.

As a child, Cayden was loved by no one.

His gloomy appearance made him an outcast in his village.

Pale skin, sunken eyes, a sharp and eerie expression—on top of that, his introverted personality made it impossible for him to form connections.

The children called him a “ghost,” and the adults ignored him.
No warmth, no kind words—nothing was ever given to Cayden.

“Look at him, always sitting in the corner by himself.”

“He’s so creepy, with those unsettling eyes.”

“Goodness, is he mumbling to himself again...?”

In reality, Cayden was just reading a book or lost in thought, but people treated him as if he were a monster.

Even his parents kept their distance.

“...I can’t believe that child came out of my womb. What sin did I commit to deserve this?”

“It’s not your fault. Think of it as... just an accident.”

“Other children are so bright and cheerful, but looking at Cayden makes me feel uneasy.”

“Shh, he might hear you. If Cayden finds out, he might get hurt. And if that creepy kid gets hurt, who knows what he might do?”

“D-do something like what?”

“Summon something demonic, maybe...”

“Ahhh, that’s terrifying! Should we contact the church?”

“No. If we do, people might think we’re on his side. Just keep Cayden from going outside. The villagers are uncomfortable enough as it is.”

“He doesn’t want to go out anyway.”

And so, Cayden grew up in such a childhood.

Surrounded by people’s coldness, he became even more withdrawn and gloomy.

He avoided contact with others and preferred to be alone.

One day, a ray of light entered his dark world.

“Hi, Cayden!”

It was the girl who lived next door.

Her brown hair swayed in the breeze, and her freckled face was full of charm.

“People say you’re a ghost. Are you really a ghost?”

“.....”

At first, Cayden ignored her. He was deeply flustered inside.

But the girl came to see him every day and struck up conversations. Eventually, Cayden began to open up little by little.

“Hi, Cayden. What book are you reading today?”

“...An insect picture book.”

“Oh, I don’t like insects. They’re gross. But Cayden, why are you always alone?”

“...Because I like being alone.”

“Really? Actually, I like being alone sometimes too—it’s comfortable. But I also feel comfortable being with you.”

Unlike Cayden, who stayed cooped up at home, the girl roamed the village, playing with other children.

But every evening, she would come to Cayden and tell him about her day.

“Something fun happened today! A circus came to the village square. You should’ve seen the animals they brought. There was this giant creature with a long nose—it was huge!”

“The baker made a new kind of bread! It’s sweet and has blueberries in it. I’ll bring you some tomorrow.”

“They say weird noises are coming from the old barn at the edge of the village. There’s a rumor that a ghost is haunting it. Everyone is blaming you. Isn’t that funny?”

Through her stories, the girl gave Cayden a small world of his own. Cayden began to look forward to her visits, and her light started to seep into his dark, isolated world.

As time passed, the girl grew into a beautiful young woman. Her brown hair became fuller, and her freckles gave way to radiant skin.

Cayden, too, grew taller and thinner, but he remained pale and carried a gloomy aura.

“Cayden, there’s a new guy in the village. His name is Bran, and he’s so handsome! I think he likes me.”

“...He likes you?”

Cayden felt his heart sink.

At some point, he had fallen for her. But he didn’t have the courage to confess. He was afraid it might drive her away.

“...Don’t be ridiculous. Who would like you? Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Her face puffed up with annoyance at his dismissive remark.

“What? What’s wrong with me? I’ll have you know, I’m quite popular with the guys in the village!”

“Sure, maybe the village guys have bad taste.”

“You’re such a jerk, you ghost!”

She pinched him but quickly burst out laughing playfully.

“You can be so cheeky sometimes, Cayden.”

That day, the conversation about Bran ended there.

But Cayden felt increasingly weighed down.

He couldn’t shake the fear that she might slip away to Bran, and he began to lose sleep over it.

“Cayden, you look terrible. Well, worse than usual—you actually look like a ghost now.”

“...Really? Maybe it’s because I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“You’re not sleeping? Why? Could it be...?”

She narrowed her eyes and smirked mischievously.

“Because you’re lonely?”

“T-that’s not it.”

“Oh my, you’re blushing! If you’re lonely, just tell me—I’ll keep you company.”

“.....”

Cayden turned red and clamped his mouth shut.

She laughed and patted his shoulder.

“I’m kidding. But seriously, Cayden, you need to get out more. Staying cooped up all the time is making you sick. Tomorrow, come to the village square.”

“The square?”

“Yep. There’s going to be a play tomorrow. Let’s go watch it together.”

“.....”

“Don’t want to?”

“No, I don’t mind.”

“Then it’s settled. See you tomorrow.”

The next day, Cayden nervously left his house and headed to the village square.

It had been so long since he’d gone outside, but he was excited to spend time with her.

Most of all, he had decided that today, he would confess his feelings.

“Cayden! You came! Over here!”

Hearing her voice, Cayden turned with a smile.

And froze.

She was walking arm-in-arm with a man.

“Cayden, meet Bran! You remember me talking about him, right? Bran, this is Cayden, my close friend.”

“Nice to meet you, Cayden.”

Bran extended his hand with a charming smile.

Unlike Cayden’s frail hands, Bran’s were strong and masculine.

“I’m Bran. And I’m in love with this amazing woman.”

“Hehe, Cayden didn’t know yet. I was going to tell him today.”

“.....”

Cayden stood frozen, not shaking Bran’s hand, not looking at him—just staring at the ground.

“Cayden?”

Her voice buzzed faintly in his ears.

Cayden's world was crumbling.

Images of her flashed before his eyes:
Her freckled smile, her stories, her light.
And now, her standing with Bran.

Darkness bloomed in Cayden's heart.

I wish they'd all just die.
I wish the world would end.

A low, chilling voice echoed in his mind.

"I have heard you."

"Offer your soul to me... become my servant... and your wish shall be granted."

Cayden didn't hesitate.

"...I offer my soul."

When he came to, everyone in the village was dead.
Even her.

Chapter 162: The Young Elf

Naxxis recalled the humiliation he suffered in the Elf Forest, and his mood darkened.

At the time, Naxxis had just awakened from his seal and immediately sought to destroy the World Tree.
It was his way of exacting revenge for the imprisonment he had endured.

“Stop!”

Someone shouted.

“I won’t allow you to harm the World Tree!”

Naxxis slowly turned around.
Standing behind him was an old, frail elf, visibly weakened with age.

A sneer formed on Naxxis’s lips.

“Do you think you can stop me, old elf?”

“...I am Nameria, leader of the elves and a descendant of Althea, the one who sealed you away.”

“Hah!”

Naxxis burst into cruel laughter.

“This decrepit and pathetic elf claims to be Althea’s descendant?”

It wasn’t just Nameria.

All the elves around them trembled in fear.
There were no heroic figures like Althea among them.

“To think that the once-mighty elves who sealed me have fallen to such disgraceful weakness. Althea would weep if she saw this.”

Nameria’s expression twisted in anger.

“...Though the strength of the elves may have diminished, our resolve has not. We will never let you harm the World Tree.”

At his words, elves and ents began to gather.

Their faces were solemn, as if they had accepted their imminent deaths.

But to Naxxis, their determination was laughable.

“Fools. Do you truly think you can stop me? Your time is over. The World Tree, this forest, and this world will all vanish into my darkness.”

Naxxis raised his sword high.

“All will bow before my power.”

Dark, destructive energy began to gather at the tip of his blade.

Everything was going as he envisioned.

Anyone watching would have seen him as the perfect image of a god of destruction, ready to bring ruin to the world.

But just as Naxxis prepared to bring his blade down, a young elf with silver hair descended softly in front of him.

“?”

Before Naxxis could process what he was seeing, an overwhelming impact struck him.

BOOM!

In an instant, Naxxis’s body was split in two.

“What... what is this...? My power... my body... impossible... this must be a mistake...!”

Naxxis couldn't believe it, but he began crawling toward his severed lower half.

He intended to use his dark powers to reattach his body.

But before he could, the young elf reached out her hand, and his lower half disappeared without a trace.

“?!”

Naxxis's eyes widened in shock.

“Maybe I can sell this...”

“Sell...? W-what are you talking about? You... who are you...?”

Thud.

A staff struck the ground in front of Naxxis's face.

Looking up, he saw Nameria glaring down at him coldly.

“The elves have not grown weak. It is you who has.”

“No, this isn't... it's just that child... that ridiculous child...”

“In the past, our ancestors lacked the power to destroy you. Sealing you was the best they could do.

But we have spent all this time growing stronger, preparing to face you.”

“This... this isn't because you're strong...!”

“It's time to end this cursed connection, Naxxis.”

Nameria raised his staff high, and a mysterious green light gathered at its tip.

“I will destroy you.”

Nameria brought the staff down, and the green light shot into Naxxis's head.

Even for Naxxis, weakened and reduced to only his upper body, the

attack was too much.

His consciousness faded as his head seemed to explode.

Naxxis snapped back to the present, his face twisting with rage and humiliation.

The memory of Nameria and the elves looking down at him so smugly still burned in his mind.

Just moments before, they had been trembling in fear, prepared to die.

Yet, as soon as the tables turned, they acted as if they were righteous and victorious.

“They didn’t do anything themselves,” Naxxis growled, “but acted like they had accomplished something grand... damn those cursed elves...”

Naxxis vowed to return to the Elf Forest as soon as he regained his strength.

He would cut down the World Tree and make each elf who had mocked him die in agony.

“I remember all their faces. None of them will have an easy death.”

Of course, he would need to be cautious of the young elf.

That young elf was far stronger than the ancient hero Althea. She had split Naxxis in two with a single blow.

To be honest, even if Naxxis regained his full power, he doubted he could defeat her.

If he returned to the Elf Forest and saw that young elf, he would run without hesitation.

Being cut in half again wasn’t something he cared to experience.

“Damn it...”

Naxxis scowled as he walked.

Soon, he reached the stairs leading out of the mansion's basement. He began climbing them slowly.

"Why is this body so small...?"

Selly's body felt incredibly tiny to Naxxis.

In his true form, Naxxis had been a towering figure that all beings looked up to.

But now, everything seemed large and looming over him.

It was a blow to his pride.

"...If you want, you may stay with her," a voice drifted from nearby.

"...I'll provide accommodations and the best treatment."

Naxxis looked up.

A human stood blocking the entrance to the basement.

Naxxis's lips curled into a sinister grin.

He had been looking for someone to take his anger out on, and this man was a perfect target.

Naxxis approached the man from behind and reached out his hand.

Thud!

His hand pierced through the man's body.

"Heh heh..."

The man turned slowly to look at Naxxis, his face frozen in fear.

Naxxis withdrew his bloodied hand with a sickening sound.

Squelch!

Warm blood splattered onto his face, but Naxxis didn't flinch. If anything, the sensation of blood on his skin lifted his spirits slightly.

“Are you afraid, human?” Naxxis asked.

“Are you afraid of death?”

The man seemed to want to speak, but his life faded before he could, and his body crumpled to the floor.

“Hahahahaha!”

Naxxis let out a manic laugh.

“This is it! The pain and despair of humans! This is what I’ve craved!”

The fear the man had felt moments before his death—it was a source of power for Naxxis.

It had been a long time since he had felt so invigorated.

Naxxis spread his arms wide and declared:

“I am Naxxis, god of chaos and destruction! The end of the world has begun! Blood and terror will engulf the continent, and everything will be destroyed! With my resurrection, nothing will...”

Naxxis’s triumphant speech faltered as something caught his eye.

A silver-haired young elf stood before him.

Naxxis’s brow furrowed.

This elf... she seemed familiar somehow...

“Ahhhhh!!”

Naxxis’s mind filled with confusion and terror.

The figure in front of him was unmistakably the young elf who had split his body in the Elf Forest.

As she approached, the young elf spoke calmly.

“We meet again.”

“.....”

Naxxis wanted to curse his fate.

After all the effort he had gone through to be reborn and roam the world freely,
why did he have to encounter this elf again?

Naxxis wanted to run,
but fear paralyzed him, and his body wouldn't move.

If he had his original body, he might have escaped.
Naxxis's mastery of dark magic had included spells to confuse, obscure, or bind enemies, allowing him to flee.

But now, stuck in a young girl's body, he was far more vulnerable to fear.

No matter how hard he tried, his body refused to obey him.

Naxxis collapsed to the ground, staring up at the young elf.

His eyes filled with tears, and warmth spread in a humiliatingly damp patch between his legs.

He looked utterly pitiful.

Chapter 163: Sparky

Cayden soon drew his last breath.

Lakia hadn't bothered to control the output of her magic this time.

When facing the knights of the Bolton family earlier, she had adjusted her magic to merely knock them unconscious. But against Cayden, there was no need for such restraint.

After all, he was a dark mage who served the evil god, Naxxis.

Ariel wouldn't have spared a dark mage like him, and if Ariel had no qualms, Lakia had even less reason to hold back.

Meanwhile, Naxxis regained some composure after Cayden's death.

The fear and despair Cayden had experienced in his final moments provided Naxxis with a surge of power.

Rising abruptly to his feet, Naxxis unleashed a veil of darkness around him.

The dark shroud was meant to obscure Ariel's vision and allow him to escape.

Fighting Ariel was simply not an option.

Even at the height of his power, Naxxis had been split in two with a single strike.

To fight in Selly's frail body would be nothing short of suicide.

Thud!

With the dark shroud obscuring everything, Naxxis launched himself into the air.

In an instant, he soared high above the ground.

Below, the Bolton family's castle lay in full view.

"Fools," Naxxis sneered. "You've let me escape."

Hidden within the darkness, he imagined Ariel scrambling below, disoriented.

"I am Naxxis, god of chaos and destruction. I may retreat today, but when we meet again, I'll ensure you suffer. I'll remember every face...."

He made a mental note of Ariel's face, as well as Lakia's and Lu's.

Both had mocked and ridiculed him—mercilessly.

As he dwelled on the memory, tears threatened to well up again. Frustrated, Naxxis shook his head violently to dispel the thought.

This body seemed prone to crying at the slightest provocation.

I need to find another body soon, he thought bitterly. For now, I'll head to the Demon King's castle. I can rely on that wretch's resources until I recover....

Just as Naxxis turned toward the Demon King's domain, he realized someone was in his path.

"Ahhh!"

A scream escaped his lips.

It was Ariel, staring at him with her usual calm, expressionless face.

"Y-you... how... HOW?!"

Overwhelmed by shock and fear, Naxxis lost his balance and began plummeting toward the ground.

"KYAAAA!"

While falling wasn't particularly dangerous for Naxxis—he could heal

any injuries with his dark powers—the sheer terror of the situation paralyzed him.

“S-save me! Please!”

Once again, his pants grew damp.

Just as he was about to hit the ground, Naxxis’s fall abruptly stopped.

“!”

His body hovered in midair, then slowly descended to the ground.

It was Ariel’s telekinesis.

“Haa... haa....”

Collapsed on the ground, Naxxis trembled uncontrollably as Ariel approached him, her steps slow and deliberate.

Ariel had been contemplating something.
What should she do with Naxxis?

If he had been in his true form, she would have immediately cut him down with *Ragnarok*.

But now, he inhabited Selly’s body. Hurting him would mean hurting Selly.

“Heh... heh heh heh....”

Naxxis noticed Ariel’s hesitation.

“You’re worried about this girl’s body, aren’t you?”

Why else would she have caught him mid-fall?
Why else would she not attack him now, when she had the chance?

A wicked grin spread across Naxxis’s face.

Let’s test this.

He raised his hand and slapped himself hard across the cheek.

SMACK!

Pain shot through him, and tears threatened to spill, but it worked—Ariel's eyes narrowed slightly.

For Ariel, that was a noticeable change in expression.

Let's try that again....

Naxxis prepared to slap himself a second time, but before he could, Ariel used her telekinesis to restrain his arm.

“Hahahahaha!”

Naxxis burst into laughter.

It was clear now.

“You care about this girl's body! There was no need for me to run after all!”

Standing up, Naxxis looked at Ariel with newfound confidence.

Despite the tears still clinging to his eyes, his swollen cheek, and his wet pants, he felt victorious.

“If you want to protect this girl, you'll obey me! Otherwise, I'll smash her head against a wall! If you don't believe me, I'll show you right now!”

Naxxis sprinted toward a wall, but before he could harm himself, Ariel's telekinesis stopped him again.

“Hah! Restraining me won't help! I'll simply stop breathing or refuse to eat! This girl will perish, one way or another!”

His arrogance grew.

“I can hear her begging inside me! She's pleading for her life, desperate for you to save her!”

Of course, it was all a lie, but Ariel couldn't verify his claims.

“Now, bow before me!” Naxxis demanded. “Kneel and swear your loyalty! Kiss my feet and pledge yourself as my servant! Otherwise, I’ll bite my own tongue and end it all! Hahaha!”

“.....”

To Naxxis’s delight, Ariel began walking toward him, her expression submissive.

Seeing this, Naxxis could barely contain his excitement.

“Yes! That’s it! You’ve made the right choice! There’s no way to remove me from this girl’s body! Not even divine magic will work! Even a saint couldn’t—”

He froze mid-sentence as Ariel’s ears twitched.

“...Overwhelming divine power...” Ariel murmured, her gaze shifting to Naxxis.

Her once submissive expression vanished, replaced by a faint smile.

Suddenly, Naxxis felt a chill down his spine.

“Y-you... it’s impossible... you don’t have divine power... just kneel already...!”

A brilliant white light began radiating from Ariel’s hands, wrapping around Naxxis.

“!!”

The light was unmistakably divine energy—immense and overwhelming.

“No! This can’t be happening! Stop! Please, stop!!”

Naxxis’s desperate screams echoed, but Ariel’s face remained cold and resolute.

Naxxis was forced out of Selly’s body, reduced to a small, fist-sized black mass.

Despite its tiny size, the dark form radiated an oppressive aura, like concentrated malice.

But it was powerless.

Ariel had already surrounded it with a holy barrier, rendering it immobile.

It flickered and wavered like smoke, but that was all it could do.

[...I've lost.]

Naxxis's voice was hollow.

[...I admit defeat. Destroy me now.]

As divine energy gathered in Ariel's hand, Naxxis continued:

[...But remember this. I will return. Whether it takes centuries or millennia, I will rise again and drown this world in chaos. Your descendants will suffer, torn apart and burned alive, dying in terror and agony...]

Suddenly, the divine energy in Ariel's hand dissipated.

“.....”

Ariel pressed a finger to her lips, deep in thought.

In the Elf Forest, she had split Naxxis in two, but he had still returned.

If she destroyed him now, wouldn't he just come back again?

[...Why aren't you finishing me? I've surrendered! Destroy me already!]

Naxxis's panic grew.

He regretted his earlier bravado.

[...Actually, I lied! If you destroy me, I'm gone for good! This was my last chance at revival, I swear!]

Ariel didn't believe him.

[...Please, spare me! I want to live! I beg you!]

“Okay,” Ariel said, nodding.

“I’ll let you live.”

[...What?]

Naxxis was confused.

Reaching out, Ariel summoned something from the air.

[...What is that?]

“It’s your new body.”

[...What?!]

Floating before them was a chubby, ugly dragon doll.

[You don’t mean...]

Ariel smiled faintly.

“From now on, your name is Sparky.”

Chapter 164: Training

[D-don't be ridiculous! I am Naxxis, the god of chaos and destruction! I won't be confined to some ridiculous doll—Aaaagh, no! Stop! I refuse!]

Naxxis struggled desperately, but it was useless.

Ariel gripped him tightly and forcefully stuffed him into Sparky.

“Divine Bound.”

With a calm tone, she sealed him inside the doll using holy magic.

The evil god—now no longer Naxxis but Sparky—looked utterly defeated.

If she had to give him a body, couldn't it at least have been something more dignified?

But no, it had to be this ugly, fat dragon doll, one that looked like it had been sloppily patched together after being torn apart.

The sheer humiliation made Sparky's stubby wings quiver uncontrollably.

Ariel, seemingly oblivious to Sparky's shame, gave him a shy smile and greeted him.

“Nice to meet you, Sparky.”

“.....”

Sparky glared at Ariel as fiercely as his plushy face allowed, but it had no effect.

When Levena had repaired Sparky, she had overstuffed him with

cotton, leaving his attempts at an intimidating expression looking nothing short of comical.

To Ariel, however, his goofy face only made him seem adorable.

Unable to help herself, she hugged Sparky tightly and began ruffling his head.

“L-let me go! Do you even know who I am? Curse you! Stop patting me!”

Sparky flailed helplessly, but his cotton-stuffed arms were useless.

“Ugh...”

At that moment, Selly opened her eyes.

With a puzzled expression, she glanced around the room before spotting Ariel.

“Huh... is that... Ariel?”

Slowly, she walked toward her.

“It is you, right? You’re Ariel, aren’t you?”

Ariel nodded.

“Hello, Selly.”

“Ariel!!”

Selly flung herself into Ariel’s arms, embracing her tightly.

In the process, Sparky was squished flat between them, but no one paid him any attention.

“Ariel! I missed you so much! How are you even here?”

Before Ariel could answer, Lu chimed in.

“My lady came to save you. We heard you were captured by the Bolton family.”

Selly turned her gaze toward Lu, who was perched on Lakia's shoulder.

"Lu!"

She recognized him immediately.

They had met once when she visited Ariel's lodging in Sierra.

"It's been so long! You haven't changed a bit. Oh! Wait—wasn't there also a wolf? That big, white wolf?"

"Ghost?" Lu replied with a faintly bitter tone. "We haven't seen much of him lately."

"Why not?"

"He's... fallen in love. He's even had cubs already."

"Oh... I see."

Feeling awkward, Selly nodded and looked down.

"....."

She suddenly noticed that her undergarments felt damp.

Realizing what had happened while she was unconscious, her face flushed red.

"Ack..."

Selly quickly pulled away from Ariel, her cheeks burning.

"S-sorry, Ariel..."

Crouching to hide the wet spot, she stammered, "I—I don't usually make mistakes like this... I guess I was just really scared this time...."

"It's not your fault," Ariel said gently.

Sparky, however, flinched slightly at her words.

Selly was safely returned to her family.

Her father, Philip, wept tears of joy, while Sir Loren and the mage Pamela hugged her tightly, their eyes reddened with emotion.

“My lady, I’m so glad you’re safe!”

“I don’t know what I would have done if anything had happened to you...”

The gloomy atmosphere that had clouded over the Matiel family lifted, replaced with joy.

Good news didn’t stop there.

After Sven’s death, Rodrik—the new head of the Bolton family—sent a letter of apology.

The letter included not only a formal apology for the incident but also a signed document relinquishing any claim to the eastern coast.

In addition, the Bolton family offered to hand over the major ports they had unfairly acquired.

With this, the Matiel family no longer had to contend with the Boltons and could fully take control of the eastern coast.

Celebrations erupted in the Matiel household.

Their dominance over the east was now inevitable.

Meanwhile, the Bolton family had no complaints about Rodrik’s decision.

Even Maxwell, the captain of the Bolton knights, supported it as the wisest course of action.

The elite knights were even relieved.

They were terrified—of Ariel and Lakia.

“We must never fight the Matiel family again... It’s suicide to go against them. We were so close to being wiped out....”

Indeed, Ariel and Lakia had shown mercy, as there had been no casualties aside from Sven and Cayden.

But everyone understood that if Ariel and Lakia had truly wanted, the Bolton family would have been erased from the continent.

A banquet was held to celebrate Selly's safe return.

Prominent figures of the Matiel family and the eastern aristocracy gathered to share in the joy.

Rodrik also attended the banquet, bowing deeply before Philip.

"I sincerely apologize...."

Philip waved his hand dismissively.

"Selly told me you tried to save her. She said you risked your life, even though you were no match for them. I am truly grateful."

"Not at all. I was too weak to protect her properly. I'm just relieved she's safe."

"...I offer my deepest condolences for Sven's passing."

"Thank you. It's painful to lose my father, but perhaps peace can finally come of it. From now on, I hope for harmony between our families."

"As do I. The Matiel family never sought control of the eastern coast out of greed. We simply feared that if the Boltons gained control, they would wage war. Sven had great ambitions, after all."

"...If my father had succeeded in gaining control, he likely would have started a war, plunging the east into chaos. Many would have died. In truth, I think this outcome is for the best. We must unite, not fight, especially now."

"You speak of the Demon King's army."

Philip nodded gravely.

“I agree. This time, war came to the north. Next time, it could come to the east. If that happens, we must stand together.”

“You have my word—the Bolton family will stand against the Demon King’s forces without hesitation.”

While the two heads of the families discussed serious matters, Ariel and Selly were enjoying their time together.

“Ariel, do you remember Corbin? The guy from the Baraton family who challenged you to a duel at Sierra’s banquet? He’s completely lost it. He’s gone mad. Honestly, good riddance—he was such a jerk. Oh, and Sir Karl...”

On the other side of the room, Lakia was busy “training” Sparky.

“Sit.”

“...No.”

“I said sit.”

“.....No.”

“Hah. Fine. I’ll show you what happens when you don’t listen.”

Lakia grabbed Sparky’s tail and began spinning him in circles.

“Aaah! Stop, stop!”

“Will you listen now?”

“Y-yes, yes! I’ll listen!”

“Good. You should’ve done that from the start.”

Watching this unfold, Lu couldn’t help but feel a mix of disbelief and pity.

This... was supposed to be an evil god?

At this point, Sparky seemed more pitiful than anything else.

“You’re Ariel’s doll now,” Lakia said sternly. “And a doll has only one job: to be cute. If you’re not cute, you’re worthless.”

Her training proved surprisingly effective.

After a few sessions, Sparky had even learned to act adorable.

When Ariel approached with Selly later, Sparky waddled over, shaking his plump body in an attempt to show off.

After spending some time with Selly, Ariel decided it was time to set off on her next adventure.

Although Selly was sad to see her go, she didn’t burst into tears as she had in Sierra.

The kidnapping incident had made her braver.

“Ariel, I’ve decided to learn magic from Pamela. I want to be able to protect myself. I’m no good with swords, but apparently, I have some talent for magic. One day, I want to be a mage like Sena from the Hero’s party.”

Ariel ruffled Selly’s hair and encouraged her to try her best. Selly promised to show Ariel her progress the next time they met.

Before Ariel left, Philip insisted on giving her a gift to express his gratitude.

“...You need a ship?” Philip asked, surprised.

Ariel explained her next destination: a mysterious island that appeared and disappeared once every hundred years.

To reach it, she would need a boat.

Chapter 165: Pirates

The golden sunrise shimmered on the ocean's surface, casting warm light through the captain's quarters.

A large table sat in the middle of the room, and across from it, Ariel sat in an oversized chair.

Her feet dangled above the floor, swinging slightly in the air.

“.....”

Resting her chin on one hand, Ariel studied the massive sea chart spread across the table.

The tricorn hat she had bought at the eastern port was too big, slipping down over her eyes, but she didn't seem to mind.

“...If we follow this route, we should reach the island.”

Her voice was filled with solemn determination, as if she were uncovering a great secret.

“There might even be a legendary treasure hidden there.”

“.....”

Lu, hovering beside her, quietly lifted the brim of Ariel's oversized hat so it wouldn't swallow her whole.

What exactly is she doing...?

Lu sighed internally.

Ever since the voyage began, Ariel had been completely immersed in this *role*.

She had even asked them to call her *Captain* instead of *Lady*.

“Hmmm...”

Ariel traced her finger along the sea chart, following the route across the open waters.

“If we sail this way, then surely...”

BANG!

The captain’s quarters door suddenly burst open, and Lakia rushed in.

“Captain! We have a problem!”

Lakia, much like Ariel, was fully absorbed in the *spirit of adventure*. She wore an oversized striped shirt in white and blue, its sleeves so long she had to roll them up multiple times.

A thick rope belt was tied around her waist, holding a compass. Her baggy shorts barely stayed up, and atop her head sat an enormous sailor’s hat, her golden hair spilling out from underneath.

“...What’s the situation?”

Ariel adjusted her tricorn hat and rose from her chair.

Lakia spoke urgently.

“A suspicious ship is approaching!”

“A suspicious ship?”

Ariel furrowed her brows, stepping toward the door—only to trip on the hem of her oversized coat.

She barely caught her balance, her cheeks flushing red, before quickly exiting the cabin.

Stepping onto the deck, Ariel took in the tranquil scene before her.

The sea stretched endlessly beneath a bright blue sky, soft white clouds drifting lazily overhead.

A warm breeze ruffled her silver hair, carrying the salty scent of the

ocean.

In the distance, seagulls cried out, gliding above the waves.

It was peaceful—beautiful, even.

And yet, Ariel's face was tense.

“Lakia, where's the suspicious ship?”

Lakia pointed excitedly.

“South! About thirty degrees off course! A ship with black sails!”

Ariel narrowed her eyes, following Lakia's gaze.

After a moment, she spotted the vessel.

Her crimson eyes gleamed.

“...Could it be a pirate ship?”

Her voice carried not fear, but anticipation.

Lu sighed and flew off Ariel's shoulder.

“Captain... we were *explicitly told* there were no pirates in these waters.”

Lu's words went ignored.

Ariel suddenly drew a small dagger from her waist, raising it high.

“All hands, battle stations!”

“Battle stations!!”

Lakia mimicked her energy, fully committed.

“Captain! I'll ready the cannons!”

“Prepare the cannons!”

“.....”

Lu stared at them in disbelief.

“...We *don't* have cannons.”

Their ship wasn't built for combat—it was just a simple vessel for travel.

“Captain, that ship is most likely just a regular fishing boat—”

BOOM!

A deafening explosion rocked the air.

Everyone froze.

Water erupted into towering splashes around them.

“...What...?”

Lu's expression twisted in confusion.

Ariel's eyes widened.

Even Lakia looked momentarily stunned.

Turning their heads, they saw a trail of smoke rising from the distant ship's cannons.

“...They fired at us,” Ariel whispered.

“They're *real* pirates!” Lakia shouted.

“Captain, what are your orders?!”

“.....”

Ariel hesitated for a split second before adopting a determined expression.

“We... We must retaliate...!”

“Then I’ll ready the cannons!”

“Prepare the cannons!”

“Yes, Captain!”

Lakia saluted, then lifted her hands—summoning a massive fireball.

Not a cannon—*magic*.

“Captain, fire is ready!”

At Lakia’s call, Ariel nodded firmly.

“Fire.”

“Haaaah!!”

Lakia launched the fireball.

It shot through the sky and struck the black-sailed ship dead-on.

BOOM!

A plume of smoke rose from the enemy ship.

Lakia jumped excitedly.

“Kyaah! Direct hit, Captain!”

“Excellent.”

Ariel gave her an approving pat on the back, making Lakia flush with pride.

Despite the damage, the black-sailed ship continued to advance.

Its structure was solid, built for battle, and figures could be seen moving across its deck.

Their movements were disciplined, their stances seasoned.

They weren’t ordinary sailors.

As the ship drew closer, Ariel and Lakia held their breath.

The sea breeze strengthened, making Ariel's silver hair and Lakia's golden locks whip in the wind.

Finally, they saw it—the unmistakable skull emblem on the black sails.

“...They're really pirates,” Lu muttered in disbelief.

He had *sworn* there were no pirates left in the eastern seas.

The recent discovery of the rare mineral *Aquamarine* had led to a massive pirate purge.

By all accounts, pirates in this region should have been wiped out.

And yet—

Here they were.

The pirate ship drew alongside their own.

The rough wind tossed both vessels as the waves roared beneath them.

Up close, the pirates' menacing faces came into view.

A burly man threw a thick rope onto Ariel's ship and hauled it tight, pulling the two vessels together.

With the ships nearly touching, the pirates' faces became clear.

The tension was palpable.

“What the hell? Just two kids?”

A bald pirate squinted at them.

“Oi, are you the only crew aboard this ship?”

Lakia scowled.

“Who are you calling kids? It’s *Captain Ariel* and her *crew*!”

“Captain...?”

The pirates turned to Ariel.

Then—

They *burst out laughing*.

“Pfft—hahaha!!”

“That little thing is the captain?!”

“We’ve got a pint-sized admiral over here!”

“.....”

Ariel stood firm, unfazed by the laughter.

She didn’t like being mocked—but she refused to falter.

“I *am* the captain,” she stated firmly.

“This ship is ours. Leave, now.”

Unfortunately, just then, her oversized tricorn hat slipped over her eyes again.

The pirates howled with laughter.

“Pfft—hey, kid! That hat looks more like the captain than *you* do!”

“And that coat—did you steal it from your grandpa?”

“Hahahaha!!”

“.....”

Ariel’s face turned red.

Lakia, however, was furious.

“How *dare* you mock our captain?! I’ll *burn* you all to ashes!”

She conjured another fireball, but the pirates didn’t seem too worried.

“Ooooh, scary! The little mage is gonna toast us alive!”

“So that *was* her magic just now.”

“Careful, boys, we might get a little suntan!”

“Bwahahaha!”

Just then, a massive figure stepped forward.

The laughter stopped instantly.

A towering man with a deep scar across his face and an eyepatch stood at the center of the deck.

His presence alone was enough to silence the crew.

“The games end here.”

His voice was deep and commanding.

He was *clearly* the pirate captain.

His gaze locked onto Ariel’s ship, and a cruel smile spread across his lips.

“Take the ship.”

“Yes, Captain!”

The pirates leapt onto Ariel’s vessel.

The pirate captain chuckled darkly.

“As for these little brats... tie them to the mast *upside down*.”

The **Black Shark** pirates, once feared across the eastern seas, had begun their raid.

Chapter 166: Pirates (2)

There were about twenty pirates.

Ariel, surrounded by them, spoke with a determined expression.

“...This ship is everything to us. We can’t let it be taken. Even if we lose our lives, we’ll protect it to the end. That is our resolve.”

Hearing Ariel’s words, Lokia also nodded with a solemn face.

“...That’s right. This ship is our very soul. We’ll give our lives to defend it!”

“Even if our blood becomes the new paint of this ship....”

“Even in death, I will follow you forever, Captain!”

At their dramatic words, the pirates burst into laughter.

“Pffft! These kids are hilarious!”

“Hey, little captain! Can you even see properly with that hat covering your face? You think you can fight like that?”

“That little mage’s sleeves are too long—she’s gonna burn herself before she burns us!”

“Hahaha!”

Some of the pirates even mocked their words in exaggerated tones.

“Our blood will become the new paint~”

“In death, I’ll follow my captain foreveeer~ Oh, how touching. Maybe they should be pirates instead?”

“We should just make them our ship’s mascots.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

Despite the ridicule, Ariel and Lakia remained completely serious.

“Just come quietly.”

One of the pirates finally stepped forward to grab Ariel.

“We’ll take good care of you—”

Wham!

Before he could finish, Ariel flicked her hand, and the pirate was sent flying, crashing into the far side of the deck.

“?”

For a moment, the other pirates looked puzzled, but they quickly dismissed it.

After all, the one who got knocked away was Smith—the weakest guy on their ship.

“Figures. Smith’s a twig.”

Then, a much larger pirate charged at Ariel.

Wham!

He, too, was sent flying, landing right next to Smith.

“...What the hell?”

Now, the pirates weren’t so sure anymore.

The second guy was one of the stronger members of their crew.

“...Are these brats not normal?”

The atmosphere grew tense.

Instead of attacking one by one, the pirates rushed Ariel and Lakia all at once.

In response, Ariel and Lakia dashed forward to meet them.

“Let’s go, Lakia.”

“Yes, Captain!”

Their silver and golden hair flowed brilliantly as they charged.

The Black Shark Pirates.

That name was synonymous with fear along the eastern coast.

Their ruthless pillaging had terrorized countless people.

At the head of it all was their infamous captain, “One-Eyed Bark.”

But Bark hadn’t always been a pirate.

In his youth, he had been a mage researching water magic at the Mage Tower.

His talent was undeniable—he was a natural-born prodigy, especially gifted in controlling water.

But his methods were... unconventional.

In one infamous experiment, he had attempted to explore the “true essence” of water by flooding the underground waterways of the Mage Tower.

The result? Several floors submerged, countless research materials destroyed, and priceless magical artifacts ruined.

The Tower Lord had been furious.

“You uncontrollable lunatic! Get out of my tower! I never want to see you again!”

And so, Bark was cast out. But he didn’t care.

“This is for the best.”

He had already realized that the Mage Tower was too small for him.

The water there was too little, too contained.

“What I need is more water... endless water... the sea.”

With that, Bark headed straight for the nearest harbor.

At first, he joined a ship as a mere deckhand.

But it didn't take long for his extraordinary abilities to surface.

During storms, he kept the ship steady with his magic. In battles, he summoned towering waves to swallow enemy ships whole.

Before long, the crew began to worship him.

“This... this is true freedom.”

On the open sea, he could experiment with magic however he pleased.

He no longer needed to hold back.

Eventually, his admirers grew into a following.

One day, those followers tossed their old captain overboard and placed Bark at the helm.

Thus, the Black Shark Pirates were born.

At the time, there were many powerful pirate crews along the eastern coast.

But none of them stood a chance against Bark.

The **Red Axe Pirates**, a crew of dwarves? Defeated.

The **Straw Hat Pirates**, led by a man who claimed to have eaten a mystical fruit? Crushed.

Even the **Titan**, a supposedly unsinkable ship, had been split in half and sent to the ocean depths by Bark's magic.

As the years passed, the Black Shark Pirates became the dominant force on the eastern seas.

The mere mention of Bark's name sent shivers down the spines of sailors.

He was a legend. A tyrant.

At least, as long as he stayed on the water.

Bark had one weakness—stronger mages.

If the Tower Lord himself ever came back for revenge, Bark knew he'd be fried by a single lightning spell.

So, he remained cautious.

He always layered his ship with protective magic. If a navy fleet approached, he fled before they could get close.

This strategy had allowed him to survive the recent pirate-hunting operations.

If he had even the slightest suspicion that an opponent was dangerous, he would simply disappear.

But even the smartest predators make mistakes.

Today, Bark made **three** critical errors.

First, he fired at Ariel's ship.

Second, he underestimated the magic that had been fired back at him.

And third—he boarded their ship.

“Impressive.”

Standing on the deck, Bark watched the battle unfold with growing interest.

The silver-haired girl, Ariel, moved with the grace of a flowing river.

She dodged the pirates' attacks effortlessly, as if she could see the future.

Her counterattacks were just as precise—each movement swift and lethal.

She struck down two, three men at a time, forcing a whistle of admiration from Bark's lips.

And then there was the golden-haired girl, Lakia.

She wielded magic with terrifying ease, skipping incantations entirely.

Fire, wind, lightning—each element danced at her fingertips, and the pirates stood no chance against her spells.

"Not bad."

Bark nodded approvingly.

For their age, their skill was remarkable.

At least, remarkable enough to be proud of.

But that was all.

Bark stepped forward.

"I suppose I'll have to step in."

He still hadn't realized.

He still thought they were fighting seriously.

He still didn't know that Ariel and Lakia were merely **playing along**.

Bark's heart pounded with excitement.

It had been a long time since he'd fought someone worth his full power.

"Let's see what you've got."

With a powerful leap, Bark landed on Ariel's ship.

THUD.

The impact sent a visible crack through the deck.

"!"

Ariel's eyebrow twitched.

"Guh... C-Captain, these kids are monsters...."

"I can't even see them move...."

Bark's pirates lay groaning on the ground, utterly defeated.

The only ones left standing were Ariel, Lakia, and Bark himself.

"You're impressive," Bark admitted, grinning.

"For kids, you should be proud of your strength."

He raised a hand, gathering mana.

The sea churned violently in response.

Behind him, water began to rise and take the shape of a **massive dragon**.

"But the world is vast, and there are many stronger than you."

The dragon's mouth opened wide, a swirling torrent of water gathering inside, preparing to fire.

"Let me teach you that lesson—"

But nothing happened.

The sea fell silent.

Bark blinked, confused.

The great water dragon... was melting, dissolving back into the ocean.

“...What?”

He turned, only to find Ariel standing right in front of him.

She wasn't looking at him.

She was looking at the deck beneath his feet.

The cracked deck.

Bark's boots had shattered it upon landing.

Slowly, she lifted her gaze.

“You... broke my ship.”

Bark felt his heart freeze in pure terror.

Chapter 167: The Dark Triangle

‘My magic was nullified...?’

Bark couldn’t believe it.

Nullifying an opponent’s magic...

It wasn’t impossible.

But there were conditions.

An overwhelming amount of mana and a transcendent understanding of magic.

Only with those two could someone completely neutralize another’s magic.

But fulfilling those conditions was no easy feat.

Even the Tower Lord, who stood among the greatest archmages, wouldn’t be able to nullify Bark’s magic.

Then... what about a dragon?

A dragon might be capable.

Though unconfirmed, dragons were known to possess both overwhelming mana and an unparalleled understanding of magic.

‘Then... could this girl be a dragon?’

Bark’s trembling eyes locked onto Ariel.

Because of the oversized tricorn hat and the long coat dragging on the floor, he hadn’t noticed before, but now he felt something unsettling about her.

That mysteriously shimmering silver hair.

Those crimson eyes, soaked in the color of blood.

That expressionless face.

At first glance, she looked like a beautiful, adorable girl.

But there was no warmth, no emotion.

Just stillness and cold indifference.

‘She... she’s definitely a dragon....’

Bark’s suspicion turned into certainty.

Dragons were arrogant, noble beings.

If a dragon were to take on a human form, this was exactly how they would appear.

‘To think I foolishly tried to rob a dragon....’

Bark’s teeth chattered as he recalled the kingdom that was reduced to ashes overnight for angering a dragon.

Meanwhile, Ariel continued staring at him.

Those crimson eyes...

It felt as if they were piercing through his very soul.

Like they carried the weight of thousands of years.

In front of those eyes, Bark realized just how insignificant he truly was.

And he was afraid.

Ariel’s gaze wasn’t simply emotionless.

It was as if she didn’t even comprehend human emotions.

Or perhaps... she had transcended them entirely.

SMACK!

Someone suddenly struck Bark across the back of the head.

“This bastard! You dare damage our deck?! Captain, should I turn him into ashes?”

It was Lakia.

For the first time in his life, Bark had been smacked upside the head.

Stunned, he turned to look at Lakia.

“.....”

This girl, too, had displayed remarkable magic prowess during the battle.

Although her spells were simple, her mastery over them was far from ordinary.

‘...Is she the dragon’s disciple?’

If she was a dragon’s disciple, her proficiency in magic would make sense.

‘Damn it... I messed with the wrong people.’

Bark’s mind raced.

There was an old saying: *Even if a dragon captures you, you can live if you keep your wits about you.*

Now was the time to put that saying to use.

Without hesitation, Bark dropped to his knees before Ariel.

“I-I am honored to be in your presence... I failed to recognize your greatness and committed an unforgivable offense....”

“?”

A subtle change flickered across Ariel's face.

A slight look of surprise.

"...My name is Bark, a humble mage. Due to my ignorance, I failed to recognize your majesty. I beg for your forgiveness...."

Bark's mind was spinning.

How could he appease this dragon's fury?

How could he survive this?

"Your wisdom and power are beyond my comprehension. If there is any way I can atone for my sins—"

"**Heh....**"

A chilling laugh echoed in Bark's ears.

A voice like a whisper from the depths of darkness.

"...**Humans truly are foolish.**"

Bark felt his spine freeze as he slowly lifted his head.

And there—

He saw a dragon.

Or rather, an **ugly, fat, stuffed dragon doll**.

It was Sparky.

"I heard you loud and clear just now."

Sparky, emerging from Ariel's coat, stood proudly before Bark.

"You were planning to string my master upside down on the railing, weren't you?"

Bark quickly bowed his head.

“T-That was due to my ignorance—”

“Silence! Master, you must not show mercy to this man!”

Sparky pointed a stubby little paw at Bark.

“This man has undoubtedly killed countless lives! He must pay the price! He should be **flayed alive and hung upside down from the railing!**”

“.....”

Bark’s face twisted in horror.

Hanging upside down was already bad enough.

But **flayed alive?**

At that point, he’d rather just die cleanly.

‘But seriously... what **is** this doll?’

Bark glared resentfully at Sparky.

Here he was, trying to beg for his life, and now this thing had popped out to make everything worse.

And it was just... a **stuffed toy**.

“Heh, Master, what will you do?”

Sparky fluttered up and landed on Ariel’s shoulder.

“I say we take out his intestines one by one—”

“Get off of there.”

Lakia grabbed Sparky by the tail and **hurled** him aside.

“Argh!”

Sparky hit the railing with a **thud** before flopping onto the deck.

Thanks to Lakia's relentless training, Sparky had now grown accustomed to calling Ariel 'Master' and following her commands.

However, being the former Dark God, he still had a habit of trying to corrupt Ariel.

At the eastern port, he had suggested **killing** a rude shopkeeper.

When a child accidentally bumped into Ariel, he had casually recommended **burning the kid alive**.

It was simply his nature.

Even now, Sparky was feeding off Bark's fear to strengthen himself.

Not that it mattered—he was still **just a stuffed dragon doll**.

Ariel looked down at Bark and spoke.

“...You must pay for your crimes.”

The ship resumed its voyage.

On the deck, Ariel stood with her arms crossed, staring intently at the horizon.

The sea breeze rustled her silver hair and the long coat she wore.

Over one eye, she now wore a **black eyepatch**—a souvenir from Bark.

She hadn't **stolen** it.

She had simply asked if she could have it, and Bark had immediately removed it and handed it over.

Incidentally, despite his nickname “One-Eyed Bark,” his **other eye worked just fine**.

He had only worn the eyepatch because it **looked cool**.

And now, Ariel had decided it looked cool on her, too.

She kept absentmindedly touching it, a faint smile playing on her lips.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Nearby, Bark was hard at work repairing the deck he had damaged.

“Do it properly, human!”

Sparky hovered beside him, whispering ominously.

“If you mess up, you’ll experience the pain of having your flesh ripped apart piece by piece. Or maybe you’d prefer being boiled alive and fed to the fish? No? Then how about—”

Meanwhile, Lakia and Ru were inside the captain’s quarters, supposedly **holding a strategy meeting**.

In reality, Lakia was **eating steak** from Ariel’s inventory, and Ru was **downing glasses of fruit wine**.

As for Bark’s crew?

They had been sent back on their pirate ship, with instructions to **turn themselves in at the eastern navy base**.

Whether they’d actually do so was unknown.

But **without Bark**, they wouldn’t last long before getting caught.

They were **nothing** without their captain.

“Captain, I’ve finished the repairs....”

Bark wiped the sweat from his forehead.

To avoid being flayed and strung up, he had **begrudgingly become a deckhand** on Ariel’s ship.

Though, in truth, it was more like **he was running the entire ship by himself**.

Neither Ariel nor Lakia knew the first thing about sailing.

Before meeting Bark, Ariel had **been using telekinesis** just to move the ship forward.

Ariel inspected the repaired deck and nodded in satisfaction.

It was neatly done.

“Good work.”

“Th-Thank you. So... what are your orders now?”

“Steer the ship.”

“Uh... where exactly are we going?”

Ariel pulled out a sea chart from her coat and pointed at a **specific island**.

“Here.”

Bark squinted at the location, his expression quickly turning to shock.

“W-Wait... was there ever an island there?”

Because Ariel was pointing at a place **Bark knew well**.

The Dark Triangle.

Chapter 168: Siren

[*Kihihit.*]

A chilling laugh echoed in Bark's ears, jolting him awake.

“.....”

He had dozed off at the helm while steering the ship.

How long had he been asleep?

Bark rubbed his eyes and looked around.

A pitch-black darkness enveloped the ship.

The moon and stars were nowhere to be seen.

Even the sound of waves and wind had vanished.

Only an ominous silence loomed over everything.

A shiver ran down Bark's spine.

The air was unnaturally cold, despite the absence of wind.

Instinctively, he pulled a compass from his pocket.

“.....!”

The needle was spinning wildly.

“T-This is....”

The color drained from Bark's face.

There was no doubt now.

The ship had drifted into the **Dark Triangle** while he was asleep.

[*Kihihit.*]

That eerie laughter rang out again.

Goosebumps prickled along Bark's arms as he cautiously scanned his surroundings.

Then, he saw something.

A woman.

A breathtakingly beautiful woman sitting on the ship's railing.

Her skin glowed under the dim light.

Her long hair cascaded down like gentle waves.

There was something mesmerizing about her presence, drawing Bark toward her.

“W-Who are you?”

The woman didn't answer.

She only smiled enchantingly, her eyes locking onto his.

“Who are you, and why are you on this shi—”

Bark's voice suddenly caught in his throat.

As he got closer, he saw it.

Her lower body.

It wasn't human.

It was a **fish's tail**, covered in shimmering silver scales.

Bark felt a chill creep down his back.

He recognized what she was.

A siren.

A demon of the sea.

A monstrous being that lured sailors with its enchanting song—only to **devour them**.

At that moment, the siren parted her lips and began to sing.

‘No!’

Sensing danger, Bark desperately tried to cast a defensive spell.

But—nothing happened.

‘W-What?’

Panicking, he tried again.

Still, nothing.

No mana flowed.

The source of magic itself had been completely suppressed.

Fear and shock froze Bark in place.

And in that moment of vulnerability, the siren’s song burrowed into his mind.

“.....”

His eyes grew dazed.

[*Kihihit.*]

The siren extended her hand, beckoning.

With a foolish smile, Bark stepped forward.

Inside the captain’s quarters, everyone was fast asleep.

Lakia was nestled comfortably in Ariel's arms.

Ru curled up on Ariel's stomach like a fluffy cat.

And Sparky...

Well, Sparky had been reduced to Ariel's pillow.

As an enchanted doll, he didn't seem to mind.

[*Kihihit.*]

A chilling laugh drifted in from outside.

Lakia, Ru, and Sparky remained undisturbed.

But Ariel's ears twitched.

Her eyes slowly opened.

“.....”

Something felt **off**.

It was as if **mana itself** was being manipulated.

Gently, she moved Lakia aside and set Ru down on the floor.

Then, she rose and stepped out onto the deck.

A song drifted through the air.

Sitting on the ship's railing, **a woman was singing**.

Ariel's crimson eyes flickered as she examined her.

Her **upper body was human**—but her **lower body was that of a fish**.

“...A mermaid.”

Ariel's eyes sparkled with excitement.

“That means....”

What came to her mind wasn't the **danger** of sirens.

It was **the Black Market**.

Last time, she couldn't sell the Vampire Lord, so the auction lacked enthusiasm.

But a mermaid?

People would go wild for it.

The bidding price would soar sky-high.

Then, she noticed something else.

Bark was stumbling toward the siren.

He should be steering the ship.

But instead, he was walking **straight into the siren's arms**.

And then—

He fell overboard.

Ariel instantly raised a hand.

Although the **mana suppression field** blanketed the area, **it didn't affect her**.

With a flick of her fingers, she **shattered** the interference and cast telekinesis.

The siren and Bark, who had been mid-fall, were both **yanked back onto the deck**.

[“W-What the?!”]

The siren flailed in confusion.

[“Why are we back up here?!”]

Then—

[*Kihihit.*]

More sirens emerged from the water.

One by one, they climbed onto the ship.

[“Oh? What a cute little thing we have here.”]

[“Come with us, dear. Let’s swim together.”]

Their voices dripped with sugary sweetness.

A melody spread across the deck.

Any **ordinary** person would have fallen under their spell instantly.

But Ariel...

She was too busy **counting**.

One... two... three...

A **lot**.

There were **more than twenty**.

This was **perfect** for the Black Market.

Ariel’s lips curled into a **grin**.

The sirens mistook her excitement for **captivation**.

[“This girl is so beautiful. Ahh, I can’t resist. I’ll just eat her right here!”]

One siren reached out, **baring her razor-sharp fangs**.

Ariel **punched her in the face**.

POW!

The siren **soared through the air, crashed into the railing, and collapsed onto the deck.**

Foam bubbled from her mouth.

She had been **knocked out cold.**

[“W-What?!”]

[“She didn’t fall under our spell?!”]

[“How is this possible?!”]

[“Our song isn’t working!!”]

Panic spread among the sirens.

They tried to flee.

But Ariel’s telekinesis **locked them in place.**

[“What?! I can’t move!”]

[“Let go! Let us go!”]

[“Call Father!”]

[“Father!!”]

Their shrill cries pierced the air.

Then—

A **massive figure** erupted from the ocean.

BOOM!

It landed on the deck.

Right where Bark had just repaired it.

“.....”

Ariel's brow furrowed.

["Release my daughters at once!"]

The creature roared.

His **upper body** was that of a muscular man.

But his **lower body** was a **gold-scaled fishtail**.

This was **Triton**.

The **Father of All Sirens**.

A descendant of an ancient sea god, ruler of the sirens for centuries.

Triton wielded a **deep, resonant voice** that could **summon storms** and **manipulate mana**.

"....."

Ariel **released the sirens**.

Because—

She had just found an even better prize.

["W-We're free!"]

["Father saved us!"]

["Run! Back to the sea!"]

The sirens **immediately fled**.

As his daughters swam away, Triton looked down at Ariel, his gaze filled with arrogance.

["You can still use mana in my presence?"]

No one had **ever** resisted his mana suppression before.

Unless they were a **dragon**, perhaps.

But in all his years, every **human** he had encountered fell victim to his power.

[“You’re special.”]

[“I’ll enjoy eating you myself.”]

Triton extended his hand.

A serpent-like stream of water coiled around Ariel.

It was similar to Bark’s magic—but **on a whole other level.**

After all, Triton was the descendant of a **sea god.**

But against Ariel?

There was no difference.

With a single **gesture**, Ariel **nullified his power.**

Then, with **telekinesis**, she **snapped his neck.**

CRACK.

[“.....”]

Triton’s **massive** body collapsed.

But **before it hit the deck**, Ariel **stored him in her inventory.**

Satisfied, she turned and shook Bark awake.

“Ugh....”

Bark groggily opened his eyes.

“H-Huh? I was... entranced by the siren—wait! What happened?!”

Then, he noticed the unconscious siren foaming at the mouth.

“...Ah.”

It was obvious.

A siren had tried to attack Ariel.

And lost.

‘Fools... attacking a **dragon.**’

Then—

“Wait. Why is—?”

Bark’s face twisted in despair.

The **deck he had just repaired** was **destroyed.**

Again.

“Looks like you need to fix it again,” Ariel said.

“.....”

Bark let out a deep sigh.

“...Understood.”

Meanwhile, the lone siren left behind **trembled** in horror.

[**F-Father is dead...!**]

Chapter 169: Mia

The siren, sent flying by Ariel's punch, had briefly lost consciousness.

Her body had stiffened from the impact, and foam dribbled from her lips.

But soon, she felt a **thud** reverberate through the deck, stirring her awake.

“.....?”

A massive silhouette loomed before her.

A muscular upper body.

A lower half covered in **golden scales**—a fish's tail.

It was her father, **Triton**.

‘Father is here!’

Relief surged through the siren's chest.

She tried to lift herself up.

Triton's powerful presence filled her with hope.

He was the **ruler of the sea**, the **guardian of all sirens**.

An **absolute being**.

No enemy had ever stood before him without kneeling.

This time would be no different.

Triton gazed down at Ariel with arrogance.

Seeing that, the siren cheered internally.

‘Father, punish that child! She hit me with her fist!’

As if responding to her plea—

Triton controlled the water, binding Ariel in place.

And then—

CRACK—

His neck twisted **completely backward**.

“!!”

The siren’s face froze in shock.

Her once-reliable father **collapsed**, his tongue lolling out, eyes rolled back.

Before his body even hit the deck, it **vanished**.

Ariel had stored him away, nodding in satisfaction.

‘M-My father is dead...!’

More than grief, **fear** consumed the siren.

Fear of **Ariel**.

She had been **knocked out in one punch**.

And now, **Ariel had snapped her father’s neck effortlessly**.

Just **how powerful was this girl?**

Step, step.

Ariel began **walking toward her**.

The siren wanted to **throw herself overboard** and flee.

But her body was frozen stiff with fear.

All she could do was **squeeze her eyes shut and play dead.**

Step, step.

Ariel stopped in front of her.

Holding her breath, the siren remained still.

Maybe if she **pretended to be dead**, they would just **throw her overboard.**

Then, she could **escape.**

“...I hit her lightly, but she’s dead.”

Ariel muttered softly.

Relief washed over the siren.

‘Yes! I’m dead! So just throw me away already!’

She **prayed desperately.**

But then—

Ariel’s next words **chilled her to the bone.**

“Then I should **sell** her.”

‘S-Sell?! Me?! Where?!’

The siren bit her lip.

Ariel, oblivious, reached out to store the “**corpse**” in her inventory.

“?”

But—it **wouldn’t go in.**

Had her inventory **filled up?**

No, impossible.

Ariel's **stamina was infinite**, and so was her inventory.

"...Still alive?"

Ariel murmured.

She reached out—

The siren's eyes **snapped open**.

"I-I'm dead! Super dead! But please, **don't sell me!**"

"!"

Ariel flinched, nearly **slapping her** by accident.

With **full force**.

If that had happened, the siren's **head would've been gone**.

"...You were pretending."

Ariel's quiet voice sent **shivers** through the siren.

"I-I'm sorry! Please spare me! I tried to eat you because—because you're too pretty! O-Of course, I'd have eaten you even if you weren't, but... **I'm sorry!**"

Tears welled in the siren's eyes as she **pleaded**.

Ariel glanced down at the siren's **silver-scaled tail**.

"Can I touch it?"

The siren **nodded frantically**.

"Yes! Yes! Touch it! As much as you want! Just please, let me live!"

Ariel **ran her fingers** over the siren's tail.

The texture felt...

Strange.

Like **a live fish.**

But **she didn't hate it.**

It was... **fun.**

A small smile tugged at Ariel's lips.

"I'll let you live."

Ariel said, looking at the siren.

"But I have a condition."

"A condition? What is it??"

"Answer my questions."

The siren's name was **Mia.**

And, true to her kind, **she was stunningly beautiful.**

...And so was her **figure.**

Ariel draped her **coat** over Mia's shoulders.

Since Mia **wasn't wearing anything.**

Ariel had found it **distracting.**

Especially now that Mia had **transformed her tail into human legs.**

Apparently, some high-ranked sirens with **mana** could change their lower halves at will.

"It's not like we can **live** on land, though," Mia said, nibbling on a macaron Ariel had given her.

"If we run out of mana, we **change back.**"

Ariel nodded, noting how the coat was **a little big** on Mia—but **suited her well**.

“So, what do you want to ask?”

Ariel pulled out her **map** and pointed at their **destination**.

“Tell me about this island.”

“An island?”

Mia stuffed another **macaron** in her mouth before taking a closer look.

“Oh! I know this place. That’s the **Isle of Eternity**.”

“The Isle of Eternity?”

“Yeah. My father told me about it. That island is **cursed by the Sea God**. It exists **forever**. It **rises and sinks repeatedly**.”

“What’s on the island?”

“No idea??” Mia shrugged.

“Father always told us **never to go there**. Even getting **close** to it is dangerous because of the **curse**. That’s why we sirens avoid it.

If we **disobeyed**, we’d get scolded.

Ah, well... now Father’s **dead**.”

“.....”

Ariel felt **a little guilty**.

Mia’s **father** was **Triton**.

And Ariel had just killed him.

Of course, **Triton had attacked first**.

So technically, it was **self-defense**.

But still...

“...I’m sorry.”

Mia tilted her head.

“Hm? For what?”

“For **killing your father.**”

“Oh, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Weaklings die. By the way, can I have **more** of these macarons?”

“...Yeah.”

Ariel handed her another macaron, feeling **slightly dumbfounded.**

Mia **giggled** and happily stuffed her face.

She wasn’t **grieving at all.**

It was simply a **difference in perception.**

For sirens, **death** was just part of the natural cycle.

It wasn’t something to be **emotional** about.

Even **Triton’s** death didn’t faze them.

They had **revered** him for his power, not **loved** him as family.

Now that he was gone, they would **simply find another powerful being** to follow.

And Mia had already **found hers.**

Ariel.

Ariel had **spared her** and **fed her macarons.**

That **mattered** more than her father’s death.

“Thanks for the info.”

Ariel dusted off her coat and stood up.

“You can return to the ocean now. Keep the coat.”

She had gathered enough useful information.

The island was **cursed by the Sea God**.

It **rose and sank periodically**.

Getting **too close** triggered the curse.

That was all she needed to know.

“...Um.”

Mia hesitated.

“Are you sure you don’t have any **more** questions?”

“Nope.”

“Then... um... **do you want to touch my body more?**”

Mia **lifted her coat slightly**.

Since she was in **human form now**, Ariel quickly **stopped her**.

Ariel’s face turned **a little pink**.

“...No thanks. I’m good.”

“O-Oh....”

Mia pouted.

“Then... is there anything I can do? **I want to follow you...**”

Just then—

“Captain! **We have a problem!**”

Bark’s **urgent** voice rang out from the deck.

While Ariel and Mia spoke, Bark had been **fixing the deck**.

He wasn't a **carpenter**—he was a **mage**.

But he worked **hard**.

Because he **couldn't** disobey a **dragon**.

“I just fixed this earlier....”

Bark grumbled, hammering a plank into place.

His fingers **kept slipping**.

The nails **wouldn't go in properly**.

“...Damn it.”

Just as he was about to **try again**—

A **deep roar** echoed.

Bark **looked up**.

And his **eyes widened in horror**.

“!”

A **massive storm front** was rolling in.

A **colossal wall of darkness** surged forward, crackling with lightning.

The ocean **twisted violently**.

Bark's face **drained of color**.

“...If we get caught in that, we're dead.”

Panicking, he **shouted**.

“**Captain! We have a problem!**”

Chapter 170: The Black Storm

Mia, the siren, turned toward Bark's urgent cry.

"Huh?!"

Her eyes widened in shock.

A **catastrophic black storm** was surging toward them.

The **Dark Triangle** was known for its unstable weather.

Dense fog constantly obscured visibility.

The calm sea could suddenly erupt into raging waves.

It was all due to **the Sea God's curse**.

The Isle of Eternity, doomed to sink and rise endlessly, had spread its curse across the surrounding waters.

That's why this region was so chaotic.

Sailors called it the **Dark Triangle**.

Mia had lived here all her life.

She had seen countless storms.

But nothing like this.

The black storm twisted and writhed like a living beast, ready to devour everything.

Even Mia, used to the horrors of the sea, felt overwhelmed.

"We have to run!"

Mia grabbed Ariel's arm, shaking her desperately.

"If we get caught in that, we're finished!"

The storm's influence was already shaking the ship violently.

Savage winds howled, and torrential rain poured from the sky.

Mia wanted to flee.

But she couldn't just abandon Ariel.

She had already chosen to follow her.

At that moment—

The cabin door burst open.

Lakia and Lu rushed out.

"Ariel!"

"Sis!"

They had woken up from the storm's violent shaking.

"What the hell is that?!"

Both Lakia and Lu stared at the black storm in utter shock.

But Ariel—

She didn't look surprised.

At first, even Ariel had been a little startled.

But she had already calmed herself.

She reached into her inventory and drew her sword.

Ragnarok.

Then, she moved forward.

Toward the approaching disaster.

The ship rocked wildly, and the typhoon raged.

But Ariel steadily made her way to the ship's bow.

“.....”

Bark's expression darkened.

As a mage, he knew what they were facing.

That black storm—

Even a dragon's magic wouldn't be able to stop it.

Running was the only option.

Yet, here was Ariel, drawing her sword to fight a storm.

It was insane.

‘...Should I escape alone?’

Bark hesitated.

But—

How?

Jumping into the ocean would be suicide.

He'd just drown.

Meanwhile, Ariel raised her sword.

She whispered:

“Ignite, Ragnarok.”

A red glow flared along the blade's edge.

“...What's she doing?”

Bark felt uneasy.

That red glow—

It wasn't magic.

It was just a fancy mana stone embedded in the hilt.

A meaningless light show.

For anyone else, it might look impressive.

But Bark, once a talented mage, saw through it immediately.

This was nothing but child's play.

'We're doomed...'

The black storm had almost reached them.

Bark made a decision.

He would jump into the sea.

Better to risk drowning than be swallowed by that thing.

But then—

Ariel's voice rang out.

"Ragna Blade."

At the same time—

She swung her sword downward.

—!

For an instant—

The air itself twisted.

Then—

BOOOOOOM!!

The black storm split apart.

Like a world being torn in half.

The ocean itself parted, forming a massive wall of water on either side.

A shockwave blasted through the area.

Yet—

The ship remained untouched.

Ariel had instantly deployed a protective barrier.

“.....”

Bark collapsed onto the deck.

“I-I... What... was that...?”

He had never seen anything so ridiculous.

A single sword strike had cleaved a storm in half.

The black storm was already dissipating.

Through the opening, golden sunlight poured in.

As if announcing the dawn of a new world.

Ariel returned her sword to her inventory.

She turned toward them, standing with the sun at her back.

“.....”

No one spoke.

Everyone just stared at Ariel in silence.

Ariel, feeling a little shy from the attention, adjusted her eyepatch with a small smile.

Then, in a calm voice, she said:

“...It’s fine now.”

The ocean was calm again.

The storm was gone as if it had been a lie.

The sky stretched in a clear blue expanse.

Soft sunlight danced on the serene waves.

The water’s surface shimmered like glass, reflecting the ship.

The ship glided forward.

And soon—

An island appeared on the horizon.

“There it is! The Isle of Eternity!”

Lu shouted.

According to the ancient map, the island was called Calibra Isle.

But after hearing Mia’s story—

They all decided to just call it the Isle of Eternity.

“Hmph. Looks normal to me.”

Lakia crossed her arms.

“That island is cursed?”

Mia nodded.

“Yes! My father said it only looks normal.

But if you get too close, you'll be cursed by the Sea God.

That's why we never approach it."

Mia had officially decided to follow Ariel.

She would go with them to the Isle of Eternity—

And later, live in Evergreen Forest.

Since Evergreen had a massive lake, she could live comfortably.

As they neared the island, Ariel turned to Bark.

"...What do you want to do?"

Bark flinched.

"I... I...."

He didn't want to go.

A cursed island?

No way.

But refusing—

That was terrifying in itself.

Ariel spoke.

"You don't have to come."

"...Huh? Really?"

"Instead, take this ship back to the Eastern Port.

Return it to the Matiel family.

Then surrender to the navy."

"Ah...."

Bark hesitated—

Then nodded.

Surrendering to the navy sounded awful.

But—

It was better than going to that island.

“...Understood.”

Hearing his reply, Ariel stood up.

She removed her eyepatch and handed it back to Bark.

“Goodbye.”

Then, she lifted herself, Lakia, Mia, and Lu into the air with telekinesis.

The ship would return with Bark.

They would fly to the island.

After exploring, they could just teleport back home.

“Hey, human!”

Lakia smirked.

“I put a tracking spell on this ship.

Try running, and I’ll hunt you down.”

Bark shivered.

“I-I wouldn’t dare! I’ll return the ship and surrender....”

He meant it.

Bark was exhausted.

Once, he loved the sea.

But lately, he had grown tired of the life of a fugitive.

‘...Maybe it’s time to quit piracy.’

He had two choices:

Die fighting the navy...

Or use his magic to work for the Empire.

“...Captain.”

Bark suddenly called out.

Ariel paused.

“I... want you to have this.”

He held out the eyepatch.

“I don’t need it anymore.”

Ariel snatched it immediately.

“...Thanks.”

Even after giving it back, she still wanted it.

She smiled, putting it on.

Bark bowed.

“...Thank you. I’ll return the ship safely.”

“Take care.”

Ariel waved.

From a distance, Lakia yelled:

“Bye, pirate~”

Bark stood still.

Until Ariel vanished into the sky.

She had only been his captain for a day.

But he would never forget her.

The little girl who split a storm in two.

“...I hope she survives.”

Chapter 171: The Sea God's Curse

A quiet forest.

The scent of grass drifted gently in the air.

Sunlight filtered through the leaves, settling softly upon the earth.

The wind whispered as it brushed against the branches, and faint birdsong echoed in the distance.

Lakia lay with her head resting on Ariel's lap.

As if lost in a dream, she was completely immersed in the tranquility of the moment.

Then, drawn by the warmth of the light, she slowly opened her eyes.

Green foliage sparkled under the sun's rays.

"Did you sleep well?"

Ariel's hand gently stroked Lakia's hair.

Her voice was so sweet—like something out of a dream.

Lakia felt a deep peace settle within her.

She wished this moment could last forever.

Still, she slowly sat up.

"...I didn't even realize I fell asleep. Where are we?"

The forest surrounding them resembled Evergreen Forest.

It was exactly the kind of place Lakia loved.

“Where are Lu and Mia?”

Lakia asked.

Ariel simply smiled.

“Lakia, do you like it here?”

“I love it. But... where are we?”

Before Lakia could finish speaking—

Ariel suddenly leaned in.

So close their noses almost touched.

Lakia’s breath caught in her throat.

Her heart pounded.

“...That’s all that matters.”

Ariel pulled back and stood up.

Lakia watched her, feeling a strange sense of longing.

“Ariel, the last thing I remember is all of us flying toward the Isle of Eternity....”

“The Isle of Eternity doesn’t matter anymore.”

Ariel said without turning around.

“We’ll live in this forest from now on.”

“...What?”

Lakia was stunned.

“What about the Isle of Eternity?”

“I don’t care about it.”

Ariel turned to face her.

Her lips curled into a soft smile.

“This forest belongs to just the two of us.”

Ariel walked toward Lakia.

“What do you want to do?”

Her voice was lazy, almost hypnotic.

“You can do anything you want here.”

Ariel’s fingertip brushed against Lakia’s lips.

Slowly.

Gently.

Trailing downward, following the curve of her jaw.

Lakia was frozen.

Her hands trembled.

“Just the two of us. So... whatever you want....”

Ariel whispered.

Tears welled in Lakia’s eyes.

“But... Ariel... we’re supposed to be on an adventure....”

She choked on her words.

“Where’s Lu...? Mia...? And Sparky...?”

“Are you crying?”

Ariel’s voice suddenly turned cold.

“A dragon crying? How pathetic.”

Ariel’s expression hardened.

She pulled away as if disgusted.

As if she was about to leave.

“A-Ariel, I’m sorry....”

Lakia panicked.

“I didn’t mean to—please forgive me....”

“I don’t need a weak dragon like you.”

Ariel’s voice was emotionless.

Her red eyes gleamed.

“I take it back. I don’t want you as my guardian anymore.”

Lakia’s heart stopped.

“I like Rebena better.”

Ariel’s words were a dagger.

“She and I are connected by our very souls. You’re nothing. I don’t need you. I’m going to abandon you.”

“No...!”

Ariel reached for the golden ring on Lakia’s finger.

The ring Ariel had given her.

Lakia clutched it desperately.

‘No! Please!’

Her mind screamed.

‘Ariel, I’m sorry! I was wrong!’

Lakia’s body trembled.

She summoned every ounce of mana she had.

A surge of energy exploded from her core.

Crack—!

Ariel’s telekinesis shattered.

She blinked, momentarily surprised.

Then—

Her expression turned ice-cold.

“...Lakia.”

She stared down at her.

“Are you defying me?”

Lakia hid her hand behind her back.

“H-Heuk... This ring... It’s precious to me....”

She sniffled.

“I can’t... I won’t give it back....”

Ariel sighed.

She scratched her cheek, looking annoyed.

“So I have to kill you to take it, huh?”

With a flick of her wrist, Ragnarok appeared in her grasp.

The crimson blade gleamed in the light.

Ariel smiled.

“Lakia, I’ll give you a chance. If you beat me, you can have whatever you want.”

Lakia shook her head frantically.

“N-No... please... don’t do this....”

“Beat me, Lakia.”

Ariel whispered.

“Then I’ll be yours. You can do whatever you want with me.

You can bathe with me.

You can spank me.

But you have to win first.”

Lakia’s breath hitched.

“Please....”

But Ariel didn’t listen.

She lunged.

“Tch—!”

Lakia barely raised a barrier.

Ragnarok sliced through it like paper.

Lakia threw herself to the side.

Barely dodging the strike aimed at her throat.

She shot a gust of wind beneath her feet, leaping backward.

“...Too bad.”

Ariel rested Ragnarok against her shoulder.

“I almost cut off your head.”

“.....”

Lakia swallowed hard.

Ariel meant to kill her.

There was no doubt.

Tears streaked down Lakia’s cheeks.

She took a deep breath—

Then, she **shed her human form.**

A brilliant golden dragon emerged in her place.

Ariel smirked.

“Good.”

She kicked off the ground, Ragnarok flashing in the air.

BOOM!

The impact shook the entire forest.

The earth cracked.

Trees splintered.

Lightning clashed against fire.

Lakia roared.

She unleashed torrents of elemental magic.

Wind howled.

The sea boiled.

A thousand blades of ice cut through the air.

But Ariel dodged everything.

She weaved through Lakia's attacks like it was nothing.

And then—

Ragnarok plunged into Lakia's chest.

“...!”

Her golden eyes widened.

Drip.

Drip.

Lakia's blood dripped onto Ariel's face.

“I win.”

Ariel smiled.

“Goodbye, Lakia.”

She twisted the blade.

But—

“No.”

Lakia whispered.

Tears spilled from her eyes.

“I win.”

Her body **exploded** with light.

Elemental Nexus.

The five elements—

Water. Fire. Wind. Lightning. Earth.

Spiraled around her.

Compressing.

Converging.

Until—

Ariel's body was **engulfed in an explosion.**

KRA-KOOM!

The entire world shattered.

The forest disappeared.

Only blinding light remained.

Lakia collapsed, her scales burned away.

Her flesh was seared.

She couldn't even move.

But she didn't care.

She had killed Ariel.

She had used her strongest magic.

A magic so powerful it could obliterate anything.

Even Ariel.

Tears fell from Lakia's eyes.

"Ariel... Ariel..."

She crawled forward.

Ariel lay where the blast had struck.

Her body was ruined.

Her lifeless eyes stared at the sky.

Ragnarok lay beside her, reduced to ashes.

“Ariel...!”

Lakia clutched Ariel’s broken form.

“Please... don’t leave me... I was wrong... I’m sorry...!”

She sobbed.

She begged.

But Ariel did not move.

Ariel was **dead**.

Then—

Tap. Tap.

Something soft nudged her cheek.

“...?”

Lakia blinked.

A plush dragon doll—

Sparky.

Suddenly—

The pain disappeared.

The ruined forest **vanished**.

Instead, she was lying on a quiet beach.

“What...?”

Lakia’s breath hitched.

Tears still clung to her lashes.

“Lakia, are you okay?”

A gentle voice.

She turned.

Lu was there.

And at the sound of his voice—

Lakia **broke down.**

“Lu...! Ariel... Ariel...! Hic...!”

“Shh, it’s okay.”

Lu wiped her tears.

“You had a nightmare.”

“...A nightmare?”

Lakia gasped.

It had felt **so real.**

“I had one too.”

Lu said gravely.

His voice was tense.

“I think... it’s the Sea God’s curse.”

Lakia’s blood ran cold.

“T-Then where is Ariel...?”

Chapter 172: The Sea God's Curse (2)

Just as Lakia had dreamed, Lu had a dream as well.

In the dream, Lu was as big as a human.

He had become the most beloved and respected author in the Empire.

His books were bestsellers, his lectures were always full, and his wealth rivaled that of high-ranking nobles.

Even more shocking—

He was married to Ariel.

They had a daughter together.

A small, adorable girl with elven ears and fairy wings.

Her name was Lily.

Lu's mansion was in the heart of the Imperial capital, and his neighbors were the Hero Sion and his younger sister, Clara.

Inside his grand estate, a colorful assortment of people lived together —

Lakia, Lionel, Ghost, Black, Ash, Sam, Skadi, and Katrina.

They all called Lu “**Master**” and relied on his support.

Whenever Lu returned home, Ariel would greet him with a warm smile.

Their daughter, Lily, would run up to him with a beaming grin and

nuzzle against his leg.

Lu was happy.

But that happiness did not last.

One morning, he woke up—

And found himself small again.

Trapped inside a cage.

Lu's cage had been tossed into a forgotten corner of the mansion, unnoticed by anyone.

Eventually, **Lily** found him.

She picked up the cage and peered inside at her tiny father.

Then—

She opened the cage, reached inside, and grabbed him.

—Thank you! I knew you were my daughter!

Lu was overjoyed.

Until he realized something was **wrong**.

Lily brought him to her lips.

And **bit down on his wing**.

She thought he was a bug.

A tiny, fluttering insect.

—No, Lily! Don't eat me!!

Lu screamed.

But she swallowed him whole.

“...That’s where my dream ended.”

Lu finished his story.

Lakia stared at him.

“...What the hell did I just listen to?”

“It’s not my fault! That’s what happened in the dream!”

Lakia sighed.

“The whole thing is ridiculous. And Ariel marrying you? **Not happening.**”

“How should I know? It was a dream!”

Lu had woken up with a jolt, still feeling the terror of being eaten.

And when he looked up—

Sparky had been watching him. **Laughing.**

“...Sparky, you just watched him have a nightmare and didn’t help?”

Lakia grabbed Sparky by the tail and spun him **around and around.**

“AAAAACK—!!”

By the time Lakia let go, Sparky lay on the ground like a ragdoll.

He had absorbed some energy from Lu and Lakia’s fear—

But after that dizzying spin, all of it was gone.

“...Honestly, my dream was just as ridiculous.”

Lakia admitted.

“I fought Ariel... and in the end, I killed her.”

She shuddered.

“That kind of nightmare... It has to be the Sea God’s curse.”

Lu nodded.

“There’s no other explanation. We **both** had weird dreams at the same time. That’s too much to be a coincidence.”

“And Sparky didn’t have one. Probably because he’s an evil god.”

“Hah. So **you** get to avoid the curse just because you’re some big scary god?”

Lakia grabbed his tail again.

“Wait—ACK! NOT AGAIN—!!”

Just then, Lu **spotted something**.

“Lakia, look over there!”

Lakia tossed Sparky aside and turned to where Lu was pointing.

“...Isn’t that Mia?”

A short distance away, a **girl** was lying on the ground.

It was **Mia, the siren**.

Lakia and Lu rushed toward her.

“Ah... N-No, stop... Don’t touch me there... Not there...!”

Mia was **trembling**.

Her body twisted as if she were struggling against something in her sleep.

She was **having a nightmare**.

“Mia, wake up!”

Lakia **slapped her**.

Mia's eyes **snapped open**.

She groggily sat up, blinking in confusion.

"Wh... Where am I...?"

"You're on the Isle of Eternity. Mia, you had a weird dream too, didn't you?"

Lu asked.

Mia slowly looked at him.

"...A dream...? Oh, so that was a dream...."

Her cheeks turned bright red.

"...That explains why it was so... strange...."

"What was it about?"

Lakia asked.

Mia fidgeted.

"...Umm, Ariel was in it. She said she'd protect me... She took me somewhere safe... But then she **changed**. She—"

•

Lakia, Lu, and Mia had **all** passed out when they reached the Isle of Eternity.

And **all** of them had strange dreams.

Dreams that started with their **deepest desires**.

Then turned into their **worst fears**.

"This has to be the Sea God's curse."

Lu said.

“There’s no other explanation for why we all blacked out.”

Lakia clenched her fists.

“...Ariel should be okay. There’s no way some stupid curse could affect her.”

“I agree. But we still need to find her.”

Before Lu could finish speaking—

“Over there!”

Mia shouted.

A short distance away—

A **girl** was lying on the ground.

Silver hair.

Elf ears.

Ariel.

•

“W-Wait, she’s....”

Lakia and Lu **froze.**

Tears were streaming down Ariel’s face.

“...Ariel is **crying**...?”

Lakia and Lu had **never** seen Ariel cry before.

“...What do we do?”

Lakia whispered.

Lu scratched his head.

“...This is a **once-in-a-lifetime** moment. We might never see it again....”

While the two hesitated—

Mia licked Ariel’s ear.

“?!”

Ariel’s eyes **flew open.**

She was met with **Mia’s smiling face.**

“Wake up, Ariel.”

Mia whispered.

“It’s time to leave the dream.”

Ariel blinked.

She slowly sat up, looking around.

Tears still clung to her lashes.

“A-Ariel...”

Lakia and Lu’s voices trembled.

“What kind of dream did you have...?”

Ariel wiped her tears.

Then—

She **grabbed Lakia and Lu.**

And **hugged them.**

Tightly.

As if she would **never let go.**

Lakia and Lu **burst into tears.**

“Waaaaah! Ariel!!”

“N-Nunim!!”

Mia smiled softly.

Sparky, meanwhile, **scowled.**

“...This is so boring.”

Ariel ignored him.

She simply whispered,

“...I’m so glad.”

She held onto Lakia and Lu for a long time.

Not letting go.

•

Aside from the dreams, the Isle of Eternity seemed **perfectly normal.**

Lush forests stretched out before them.

Vibrant green leaves swayed gently in the breeze.

Golden sunlight spilled through the trees, warming the soft moss below.

It was hard to believe this place had been submerged for a **hundred years.**

“Whoever this Sea God is, he needs a good beating.”

Sparky muttered.

“He made **my** master cry. That’s unforgivable. I’ll rip him apart, burn him, and—”

“Aaaaah!”

A **woman’s scream** cut through the air.

Ariel’s group **immediately** ran toward the sound.

They pushed through the bushes—

And found a **naked woman**.

She was **trembling**.

In front of her stood a **muscular man**.

His upper body was bare.

He wore only a piece of cloth around his waist.

And he held a **long spear**.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Lakia demanded.

The man turned.

“!!”

His **eyes widened**.

As if he had seen a **ghost**.

Then—

He **ran**.

Without a word.

Leaving the woman behind.

Ariel walked over to her.

The woman sat against a tree, her eyes still filled with fear.

Ariel pulled a set of clothes from her inventory and handed them to her.

“...?”

The woman hesitated.

As if she didn't understand **why** Ariel was giving them to her.

Ariel sighed.

And **dressed her herself**.

Only then did the woman speak.

“...T-Thank you....”

Before they could ask her anything,

A **loud growl** came from the trees.

A **huge bear** charged at them.

But—

“**Thunder Strike.**”

BOOM!

The bear collapsed, smoking.

Dead in an instant.

Ariel didn't even look at it.

She turned back to the woman.

“...Do you live on this island?”

The woman shook her head.

“...No. I only arrived today.”

Lu frowned.

“...Today?”

“Yes.”

The woman looked at Lu **curiously**.

As if she had never seen a **fairy** before.

Lu ignored it and asked,

“Then where are you from?”

“...I... I come from the Kingdom of Asla.”

“.....”

Lu’s expression turned blank.

Because—

The Kingdom of Asla had been destroyed centuries ago.

Before he could speak,

The woman **continued**.

“I am Princess Corellia of Asla.”

Chapter 173: The Sea God's Curse (3)

The ancient **Asla Kingdom** was once a powerful nation in the eastern continent.

Situated along an endless coastline, it flourished through maritime trade and fishing.

With its pristine blue waters, towering cliffs, and fertile inland plains, Asla was not only wealthy but also renowned for its breathtaking beauty.

King **Leonard III** of Asla adored the sea—so much so that it wasn't merely a pastime but an **integral part of the kingdom's identity**.

Every year, the royal family would embark on a grand voyage, a tradition that symbolized Asla's deep connection to the sea.

It wasn't just a ceremonial journey; it was an offering to the Sea God, a ritual to pray for the kingdom's safety and prosperity.

Whenever the royal fleet set sail, citizens gathered at the harbor to cheer and wish them a safe return.

However—

The fateful year came when the royal voyage **never returned**.

According to the few survivors, a **massive creature with a golden tail** emerged from the depths.

The monster **attacked their ship**, causing it to capsize.

That single event sealed the fate of the kingdom.

With the royal family lost at sea, Asla fell into chaos.

Noble factions clashed over succession, and civil war erupted.

Without a strong leader to unite them, the once-mighty kingdom fractured.

Sensing weakness, neighboring nations **launched invasions**.

In its prime, Asla could have repelled such attacks with ease.

But now—

The kingdom, torn apart by internal strife, was defenseless.

One by one, its territories fell.

Its people suffered.

And before long, Asla was no more.

The once-great maritime kingdom vanished into history, leaving behind only ruins and forgotten legends.

But—

One mystery remained.

What exactly was that golden-tailed monster?

Was it merely a powerful sea beast?

Or—

Was it something far greater?

Perhaps **the Sea God himself**, or one of his divine servants?

Had the royal family broken an ancient pact?

Had they failed to uphold their sacred duties?

Was their destruction a mere coincidence—

Or divine retribution?

No one knew.

And as time passed, the truth sank deeper and deeper into the abyss...

Never to be uncovered again.

“Hmm....”

Lu stroked his chin as he recalled what he had read.

The book was titled **[The Abyss of the Sea: The Legends of Asla]**.

He had come across it while researching potential adventure locations in the Imperial Library.

According to historical records—

The royal family perished at sea.

Which meant—

The woman standing before him now—the one claiming to be Princess Corellia of Asla—

Should not exist.

Under normal circumstances, Lu would have dismissed her as a delusional woman.

After all, how could someone from a kingdom that vanished centuries ago still be alive?

But—

This was **the Isle of Eternity**.

A cursed island.

A place where logic and reality were meaningless.

If an entire lost civilization of Ancient Giants had been found thriving in Asgard,

Then it wasn't impossible that Corellia was telling the truth.

Lu decided to test her.

"If you're really the princess of Asla," he asked, "why were you **naked** when we found you?"

"...That's...."

Corellia's face darkened.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Our ship... **sank**."

She clenched her fists.

"My father... my mother... my family... everyone... drowned in the sea."

"I—I struggled to survive. My dress, my jewelry—they were dragging me down."

"To stay afloat, I had no choice but to tear them away."

"I... somehow managed to swim to this island."

Lu's expression softened.

"I see...."

He hesitated before asking—

"Do you remember **what** caused your ship to sink?"

"...."

Corellia's entire body trembled.

Her eyes filled with sheer terror.

“T-That thing....”

Her voice quivered.

“A **massive golden tail**... shimmering in the water....”

“It **wasn’t just an animal.**”

“It had the **upper body of a man**, but its **lower half was that of a fish.**”

“It **rose from the sea**, towering over our ship....”

“And then—”

“It **began to sing.**”

Corellia clutched her head.

“A **voice so beautiful—too beautiful.**”

“The moment we heard it, the waves grew violent....”

“The ocean itself turned against us.”

“The ship flipped over, and everything was swallowed by the sea....”

Her breath hitched as she struggled to finish.

Lu remained silent, deep in thought.

It matches exactly.

The historical records, the legends, the scattered survivor accounts—

Everything Corellia described **aligned with the fall of Asla.**

Which meant—

She was likely telling the truth.

Ariel, who had been silently listening, suddenly raised her hand.

A moment later—

THUD.

A massive corpse hit the ground.

“Was it this?”

“AAAHH!!”

Corellia screamed and fell backward.

“**YES!**”

She pointed frantically.

“**THAT’S IT!**”

“**THAT’S THE MONSTER THAT DESTROYED US!**”

The others turned to see—

A huge figure lying lifeless before them.

Its upper body was covered in thick, rippling muscle.

Its lower body gleamed with golden scales.

Triton.

His neck was twisted at an unnatural angle.

A clear sign of death.

“...N-Nunim....”

Lu’s voice trembled.

“When... did you...?”

Ariel tilted her head.

“While you were sleeping.”

“.....”

It wasn't just Corellia who was shocked.

Lakia and Lu were also speechless.

After all—

They had missed the entire battle while they were unconscious.

Corellia, on the other hand, was practically hysterical.

“This hideous abomination—!!”

“This CURSED beast destroyed my kingdom!”

Lakia and Lu both frowned at the corpse.

“...It does look pretty grotesque.”

“Yeah. A human torso with a fish tail? Absolutely revolting.”

Ariel finally spoke.

“This was Mia's father.”

“.....”

Silence.

Lakia and Lu exchanged glances.

Corellia immediately shut her mouth.

They had just insulted Mia's father.

Mia, however, seemed completely unbothered.

“He's not my dad anymore.”

Mia said.

She wrapped her arms tightly around Ariel's arm.

“Ariel’s my mom now.”

Ariel smiled and patted Mia’s head.

After sealing Triton’s corpse back into her inventory, Ariel led the group deeper into the island.

They had all come to the same conclusion—

The **Sea God’s curse** had trapped this island in a repeating cycle of time.

Every 100 years, the island resurfaced.

But instead of simply rising from the ocean—

It seemed to **reset**.

And Corellia—

Was trapped in that cycle.

“Then that means something significant must happen here.”

Lu said.

“Some **event** tied to the curse.”

“Exactly.”

Ariel adjusted her eyepatch.

“We need to figure out what it **is**.”

And—

That event was likely connected to Corellia.

Ariel narrowed her eyes.

She recalled the **man** she had seen earlier.

A half-dressed warrior with a spear.

Given his clothing and appearance, he was likely a resident of this island.

Which meant—

There could be an entire village here.

Just as Ariel was thinking this—

Corellia suddenly spoke up.

“That man....”

She hesitated.

“He... knew my name.”

Ariel’s gaze sharpened.

“...What?”

Chapter 174: The Sea God's Curse (4)

Corellia's words made the **mysterious man** even more suspicious.

If he knew Corellia, then he might also know about the time loop on this island.

Of course, that was just a theory—they would have to find him and confirm it themselves.

“Let's start by finding the village, Nunim.”

Lu said, fluttering onto Ariel's shoulder.

He was **thrilled**.

Because this adventure, like all the others, was anything but ordinary.

A curse from the Sea God.

An island trapped in eternal time.

A princess from a long-lost kingdom.

This was exactly the kind of legendary story that would make **waves** across the empire once Lu turned it into a book.

“I want to uncover the truth behind the Sea God's curse.”

Ariel nodded and gently patted Lu's head.

She was curious too.

Why had the Sea God cursed this island?

Why was a princess from an extinct kingdom trapped in an endless cycle of time?

...

Meanwhile, **Corellia** was fidgeting with her hands as she **stared at Ariel** walking ahead.

‘She’s so cute...’

Silver hair that shimmered under the light.

Eyes as red as rubies.

Like a doll come to life.

If Corellia had met Ariel back in her palace days, she would have hugged her and never let go.

She would have pinched her cheeks until they turned red,

refused to sleep without cuddling her,

and smothered her in affection until she cried.

But this wasn’t the palace.

This was an unknown island.

A strange, unfamiliar place.

Her status as a princess meant nothing here.

So she had to hold back.

‘An elf, huh...?’

She hadn’t noticed at first, but now she saw it clearly—**Ariel’s ears were pointed.**

Which meant she was not human.

Corellia knew about elves.

They lived near **the World Tree**, loved nature, and had a **long-standing rivalry with dwarves**.

They were born with innate magical talent, giving them great influence over the continent.

But more than anything—

They were known for their unparalleled beauty.

When Corellia first heard that, she thought it was an exaggeration.

But now—

She realized it wasn't.

She couldn't take her eyes off Ariel.

Her gaze overflowed with desire.

Her hands fidgeted restlessly.

'I want to touch her...'

Of course, it wasn't just Ariel.

The entire group was ridiculously attractive.

Lakia, the golden-haired girl in a rabbit hoodie, was prettier than any noble lady Corellia had ever seen.

Mia, the tall, elegant woman in a loose jacket, had the kind of beauty that made Corellia feel self-conscious.

Even Lu, the tiny fairy with fluttering wings, was adorably charming.

...The only one she wasn't sure about was the fat, ugly dragon plushie—**Sparky**.

A talking, moving toy was fascinating, sure.

But this one kept whispering eerie things, cackling ominously, and radiating a disturbing aura.

Even now, it was circling Corellia, whispering—

“Hehehe... You have no memory of what’s happening to you... How tragic. To be trapped in an endless cycle of suffering... But soon, you’ll know the true depths of despair... Soon, you will realize just how—”

“Shut up.”

SMACK.

Lakia whacked Sparky on the head.

“ACK!!”

Sparky slammed into the ground.

Lakia kicked it away like garbage.

“Quit yapping.”

“....”

Corellia forced an awkward smile.

Lakia’s violent nature made her a little nervous.

And judging by the way she obliterated that bear earlier, Lakia’s magic skills were terrifying.

Corellia couldn’t help but wonder—

An elf, a fairy, a high-ranking mage, a talking plush, and a mysterious girl clinging to Ariel calling her ‘Mom’...

‘...I don’t get it.’

She gave up trying to understand and simply kept walking in silence.

After walking through the dense jungle, they finally reached a village.

It was a small settlement, with cone-shaped huts surrounding a

massive tree.

A narrow dirt path ran between them.

Smoke rose from some huts, carrying the scent of food and fresh earth.

Children's laughter and adults' conversations filled the air.

The villagers wore simple leaf-and-hide clothing, with some adorned in feathers and bone ornaments.

The moment Ariel's group approached, the villagers froze.

Adults hurriedly pulled their children behind them.

Young warriors grabbed weapons, their eyes filled with fear and caution.

Ariel and the others stopped moving.

Silence.

Then—

An elderly man slowly emerged from the largest hut.

He leaned on a gnarled staff as he approached.

His face was deeply wrinkled, his eyes sharp despite his age.

"...Who are you?"

His voice was hoarse.

"How did you reach this island?"

"We're on an adventure."

Lu answered, hovering above Ariel's shoulder.

"We mean no harm. We just want to learn about this village."

“...An adventure? You came from the outside world?”

“That’s right.”

The elder looked thoughtful for a moment—

Then his eyes landed on Ariel.

And suddenly—

His face went pale.

“H-HIIK!!”

The elder stumbled back, trembling.

The villagers, too, began whispering in horror.

Their expressions changed from caution—

To absolute terror.

Then—

The elder fell to his knees before Ariel.

“P-please, have mercy!”

“Spare our village!”

The other villagers followed suit.

They rushed forward, kneeling before Ariel.

They pressed their foreheads to the ground, their voices filled with desperation.

“P-please, great one! Do not sink our island into the sea!!”

“...?”

Ariel tilted her head, confused.

Why were they reacting like this?

“Hahaha! It seems they instantly recognized Ariel-sama’s greatness!”

Lakia smirked, clearly enjoying the sight.

But Ariel had a feeling that wasn’t it.

She knelt slightly and asked the elder—

“...Do you **know me?**”

The elder lifted his trembling head.

“Y-Yes... we know you...”

His voice shook.

“**The Silver Goddess.**”

“...The Silver Goddess?”

“Yes...”

The elder nodded **fearfully**.

And then, he began **telling a story**.

A **prophecy** that had been passed down for **generations**.

Long ago, a woman arrived on the island.

Her name was **Biblia**.

She was unlike **anyone they had ever seen**.

Her **raven-black hair** shone like the **night sky**.

Her **pale skin** glowed under the **moonlight**.

Her **eyes** were deep and **endless**—as if holding **the secrets of the universe**.

She **spoke rarely**, but when she did—

She uttered **prophecies** that always came **true**.

She **predicted storms, famines, and new leaders** with uncanny accuracy.

And one day—

She left.

But before she vanished, she left behind **one final prophecy**.

“One day, the Silver Goddess shall come.”

**“She will have hair like silver moonlight,
Eyes as red as the first star of dawn,
And ears as pointed as the forest spirits.”**

“Her beauty will steal the hearts of all who gaze upon her.”

“But she will not be human, nor fairy, nor god.”

**“When she arrives, this island shall sink beneath the waves—
Forever lost to the sea.”**

“...That ‘Silver Goddess’ is supposed to be Ariel-sama?”

Lakia looked **dumbfounded**.

“That’s ridiculous. Who would dare predict Ariel-sama’s fate?”

“But if the prophecy is true...”

The elder trembled.

“This island is doomed.”

Chapter 175: The Sea God's Curse (5)

Ariel read the prophecy written in the ancient records.

But she showed no reaction.

Her face was completely blank.

Seeing Ariel's lack of response, Lakia turned to glare at the elder.

"Hey! Do you have any actual proof that this 'Silver Goddess' in the prophecy is Ariel-sama?!"

"W-Well... no. Not exactly...."

"Then it's not even certain! So why are you treating Ariel-sama like some terrible omen?! She just came here as a traveler! Lu, say something—"

Lakia stopped mid-sentence.

Lu was standing completely still, his expression frozen in shock.

"Lu? What's wrong?"

Lu's voice came out in a whisper.

"This prophecy... was written by someone named Biblia?"

The elder nodded.

"Y-Yes... we call her the Prophet Biblia."

"...That's impossible."

Lu's face turned pale as he turned to look at Ariel and Lakia.

"I... know Biblia."

Lakia blinked in confusion.

"...Huh? What are you talking about? I've never met anyone by that name."

"You have."

Lu clenched his tiny fists.

"Think back. The printing house where we had my manuscript published... Do you remember the name?"

"The printing house...?"

Lakia narrowed her eyes as she tried to recall.

Then, her eyes widened.

"...Biblia Printing House."

Lu nodded slowly.

"That's right. And the owner's name was Biblia."

"Wait, hold on. That's just a coincidence, right?"

"It could be... but..."

Lu fell deep into thought.

The owner of Biblia Printing House...

A woman with jet-black hair and piercing black eyes.

A woman with a mysterious aura.

"Now that I think about it... that woman was strange."

Lu muttered as he recalled his first visit to Biblia Printing House.

It all started when Lakia and Lu got rejected by Lexicon Publishing.

The Imperial Patrol ended up chasing them down.

(...Because Lakia caused a bit of a scene.)

That's when Ilyana, the Imperial Princess, and Clara, the Hero's sister, helped them escape.

Clara suggested an independent printing house she knew—Biblia Printing House.

It was a tiny shop, hidden deep in the capital's alleyways, barely known to anyone.

When they arrived, they found a cozy interior filled with the scent of paper and ink.

Shelves stacked with handmade fairy tales lined the walls.

And there, seated at a wooden desk, was Biblia—the printing house's owner.

She had long black hair tied neatly back and sharp, intelligent eyes that seemed to pierce through everything.

"Welcome, Biblia-san."

Clara greeted her with a smile.

Biblia's gaze fell on Lu's manuscript.

"You've brought something for me to print?"

Her voice was soft, almost a whisper, like the wind carrying an ancient secret.

For some reason, Lu felt an odd sense of familiarity.

"Yes. It's my work. It's not a fairy tale—it's about the ancient giants."

Lu fluttered over and handed her the manuscript.

Biblia took it with a gentle smile.

“Interesting. May I take a look?”

“Of course.”

Biblia flipped through the pages.

Her expression remained unreadable, but her eyes gleamed with an almost unnatural light.

“...This is well-written.”

She looked up at Lu and smiled.

“I’ll publish it for you.”

“Really?!”

Clara clapped her hands in delight, and Ilyana nodded approvingly.

“Thank you!”

Lu bowed deeply before flying back to Lakia.

Lakia, however, was staring intently at something in the corner of the room.

A thin, metallic object, almost like a small, flat box.

“...What is this?”

She picked it up.

“It’s heavy.”

Lakia began shaking it curiously.

“...You shouldn’t do that.”

Biblia suddenly appeared beside her, gently taking the object from her hands.

She held it like it was incredibly precious.

“This is something very special to me.”

“...What does it do?”

Lakia asked with a suspicious frown.

Biblia simply smiled cryptically.

“...It’s a device that stores records. It’s quite delicate, so I must handle it carefully.”

“.....”

Lu had never seen anything like it before.

A strange artifact.

“...Some kind of magical tool?”

“Something similar.”

Biblia gently placed it back on her desk.

“It’s from a very distant place.”

Then, she turned back to Lu and Lakia with a warm smile.

“I’ll finish your book as soon as possible. Please be patient.”

“Thank you!”

Lu bowed again, and even Lakia nodded slightly in gratitude.

That’s when Biblia chuckled and glanced at Lakia.

“That rabbit hoodie... It suits you even better than I imagined.”

“...That woman was strange, now that I think about it.”

Lakia muttered, deep in thought.

“She had something suspicious about her. And that weird artifact she had...”

Lu nodded grimly.

“...I’m almost certain now.”

He pointed at the record in Ariel’s hands.

“This prophecy... was written by the same Biblia from the printing house.”

They decided to investigate Biblia later.

For now, their priority was uncovering the truth behind the Sea God’s curse.

Lu began questioning the elder, who answered fearfully.

They learned something shocking—

The island’s people had no idea that their home sank into the sea and resurfaced every 100 years.

They didn’t even know about the Sea God’s curse.

In fact—

They worshipped the Sea God Nereias.

According to them, Nereias was the ruler of the sea, storms, and tides.

They believed that Nereias protected the island, bringing prosperity.

They offered sacrifices and held festivals to appease him.

But...

If Nereias truly blessed this island—

Why did he curse it?

Had the island's people committed some grave sin?

Just as Lu was deep in thought—

A scream rang out.

“KYAAH!”

Everyone snapped their heads toward the sound.

A man was holding Mia hostage, pressing a blade to her neck.

It was the same man from earlier.

The one who had fled in terror after seeing Ariel's group.

“Kai! What are you doing?!”

The elder cried out in shock.

“Release her immediately! She is a companion of the Silver Goddess!”

But Kai didn't listen.

His bloodshot eyes were filled with madness.

“There is no Silver Goddess! That prophecy is a lie!”

His hands trembled as he glared at Ariel's group.

“This island... is doomed. And it's because of you people!”

His grip on Mia tightened.

“Who are you really?! Why did you come here?!”

Lu stepped forward.

“We're just adventurers. We don't mean any harm. But you need to let Mia go. That's for your own good.”

Kai shook his head violently.

“Lies!! No one has entered this island in hundreds of years!! You CAN’T be here!!”

He pressed the blade closer to Mia’s neck.

“Ugh...!” Mia whimpered, reaching for Ariel.

“Mom... help...!”

In that instant—

Ariel moved.

Chapter 176: The Sea God's Curse (6)

"Nobody move! If even one of you makes a move, I'll kill this woman!"

Kai shouted, his eyes filled with madness.

"And Corellia, come here right now!"

At suddenly being called out, Corellia flinched.

"...Who are you, and how do you know my name?"

"I... I know you, Corellia. But there's no time to explain right now. Just trust me and—"

At that moment, dark clouds began gathering in the sky.

The once-clear sky darkened, and heavy rain poured down.

It was too drastic a change to be a natural phenomenon.

"The Sea God is angry!"

"It's because Kai laid hands on the Silver Goddess's companion...!"

"Kai! Release her at once!"

The islanders murmured anxiously, but Kai paid them no mind.

He whispered to Mia, who was still in his grasp.

"I'm sorry, but just hold on a little longer. I have no intention of hurting—"

Something suddenly appeared right in front of Kai.

Thud!

A dull impact sounded, and Kai lost consciousness, collapsing to the ground.

Ariel had approached and struck his head.

“Mom!”

Mia rushed into Ariel’s arms.

Though Mia was larger than Ariel, Ariel embraced her gently, comforting her.

Ariel then turned to look at Kai, who was lying on the ground.

Lu and Lakia also approached Ariel.

“Big Sis, this guy definitely knows something, right?”

At Lu’s question, Ariel nodded.

Just moments ago, Kai had said that the island was already doomed.

And he mentioned that no one had been able to come to this island for hundreds of years.

He must know something.

Whoosh!

The rain grew even heavier.

A storm was raging, making it seem as if the Sea God truly was furious.

The islanders trembled in fear, retreating into their huts, while Ariel cast a protective shield around herself and her companions before waking Kai up.

Smack.

The method was a bit rough.

“Ugh...”

Kai slowly opened his eyes.

“W-What happened...?”

He looked around in confusion, then his gaze landed on Ariel.

Kai had taken Mia hostage in order to escape with Corellia.

He had planned to take Corellia to safety.

But that plan had been ruined far too easily.

Because of the girl in front of him—Ariel.

‘She moved like an afterimage...’

Kai hadn’t even seen Ariel move.

One moment she was standing still, and the next, he felt a blunt impact on his head and lost consciousness.

Now he was awake, and the situation had completely changed.

“...What are you scheming?”

Kai’s voice was filled with suspicion.

When he first encountered Ariel’s group, he had been utterly shocked.

For centuries, no one had been able to enter this island.

Occasionally, ships approached, but they were swallowed by catastrophic black storms.

And if they weren’t taken by the storm, a giant golden-tailed creature would appear and sink their ships.

“You know about the Sea God’s curse, don’t you?”

Lu asked, fluttering his wings.

Kai looked at Lu with mild surprise.

Having lived his whole life on the island, he'd never seen a fairy before.

"A... A talking insect...?"

"Insect?!"

Lu's face twisted in outrage.

He flew at Kai's head and started punching him, though it had little effect.

Kai actually found it somewhat amusing.

"...Yeah, I know about the Sea God's curse."

Kai carefully held Lu in his palm as he spoke.

"This island is cursed. A terrible curse..."

And then, Kai began to recount a story from long ago.

Kai had been an ordinary resident of the island.

A skilled hunter and spear-wielder, he spent more time in the forest hunting than in the village.

One day, while exploring the forest, he encountered a naked woman.

She was being chased by a massive bear, her body already covered in wounds.

Kai immediately jumped into action, fighting the bear to protect her.

Though the bear was enormous, it couldn't match Kai's agility.

After a fierce struggle, Kai managed to strike a fatal blow with his spear.

Panting heavily, he approached the woman.

“Are you alright?”

She flinched, hurriedly trying to cover herself, but Kai was more concerned with her injuries.

Her wounds looked severe.

Her arms and legs were covered in cuts, and a particularly deep gash marred her left thigh.

“...Your injuries are bad. You need to come with me to my hut.”

Kai supported her and led her to his hut.

Once there, he laid her on his bed and went to fetch water and bandages.

Then, he carefully began cleaning her wounds.

“Ah... Ngh...”

She trembled in pain but bravely endured.

“...Sorry, but just hold on a little longer.”

After cleaning the wounds, Kai applied medicinal herbs and wrapped her in fresh bandages.

“This should prevent infection. But it’ll take time to heal completely.”

For the next few days, Kai cared for her in his hut.

Every day, he changed her bandages, brought her food and water, and even cooked soup to help her recover.

Thanks to his efforts, her condition steadily improved.

During this time, she began to open up to him, revealing her past bit by bit.

He learned that she was a princess from a kingdom called Asla on the

mainland.

Her ship had wrecked in a storm, and she had washed ashore on this island.

She longed to return to her kingdom—but there was a problem.

She had fallen in love with Kai.

One day, she took his hands in hers and made a proposal.

“Come with me to my kingdom. Let’s get married and live happily together.”

Kai hesitated.

He had been born and raised on this island, and leaving for the mainland would be a great challenge.

But in the end, he agreed.

“I’ll go with you.”

Kai smiled at her.

“As long as I’m with you, I can go anywhere.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she threw her arms around him.

Hand in hand, they promised each other a future together.

But leaving the island wouldn’t be easy.

Ever since she had arrived, the weather had been growing worse.

The sky was covered in dark clouds, heavy rain fell continuously, and fierce storms raged.

Traveling by boat in such conditions was impossible.

Meanwhile, the islanders grew increasingly anxious about the worsening climate.

They believed that the Sea God, Nereias, was angry and began searching for the cause.

Eventually, they came to a conclusion.

The outsider—the princess—had angered the Sea God.

Rumors began spreading throughout the village.

To appease Nereias, they needed to offer her as a sacrifice.

At first, it was just talk.

But as the storm worsened, the villagers became convinced that sacrificing her was the only solution.

On a stormy night, they stormed Kai's hut.

They grabbed the princess, dragging her away as she screamed in terror.

Kai immediately grabbed his spear and stood in their way.

“What do you think you're doing?! Let her go!”

“Kai, step aside!”

The village elder bellowed.

“This woman has angered the Sea God! If we don't offer her as a sacrifice, we're all doomed!”

“She's done nothing wrong! Her ship simply wrecked, and she washed up here by chance! She'll leave soon!”

“Leave?!”

The elder sneered.

“Look at the sky, Kai! It's covered in darkness! The rain and storms won't stop! If we don't appease the Sea God, we'll all be swallowed by the sea!”

Even as the elder spoke, Kai refused to back down.

Offering someone as a sacrifice meant certain death.

Kai had seen the gruesome fates of past offerings.

He couldn't allow it.

"I won't let you do this. She is innocent. The storm might pass if we
—"

Thud!

Before he could finish, a villager swung an axe and struck Kai on the head.

"You fool! You've been bewitched by this outsider!"

Kai stumbled as blood dripped down his face.

His vision blurred.

"Ka-Kai!"

The princess screamed.

And then, the villagers dragged her away.

Chapter 177: The Sea God's Curse (7)

“...And so, the villagers ultimately offered her as a sacrifice to the Sea God, Nereias.”

Kai spoke with a dark expression.

“But even then, the rain and storms didn’t stop. Instead, the Sea God cursed this island.”

The curse Nereias cast upon the island was truly terrifying.

He made the entire island slowly sink into the ocean.

The terrified villagers tried desperately to escape by setting sail, but a massive black storm appeared and shattered every single boat.

In the end, the island was swallowed by the cold sea, and not a single villager survived.

And that wasn’t the end of it.

At set intervals, the island would rise again, and the villagers would be resurrected.

As if nothing had happened, everything would return to the way it was before.

The villagers wouldn’t remember sinking into the sea and would go about their daily lives as usual.

Then, once again, heavy rain and storms would come, and the island would start sinking.

Terrified, the villagers would struggle to survive, but in the end, they

would all disappear into the cold depths of the ocean.

This horrific cycle repeated endlessly, and the villagers died in the same way every time.

Their screams and suffering continued eternally, yet no one remembered it.

No one except Kai.

“I... I remember everything. But no matter what I do, the outcome is always the same. She dies, the island sinks... and then, after some time, it all starts over again.”

Kai turned to look at Corellia.

“That’s why the only thing I can do is make sure she doesn’t get hurt by the bear, and spend as much time with her as possible before the island sinks...”

Hearing Kai’s words, Corellia fell into deep thought.

The “she” that Kai spoke of was undoubtedly Corellia.

But to Corellia, everything Kai said sounded unbelievable.

She had only just arrived on this island. It was her first time meeting Kai.

She had no memory of falling in love with him or promising to spend the future together.

And to be honest, Kai wasn’t even her type.

Having grown up in a grand palace, Corellia saw Kai as nothing more than an ordinary islander.

His rough and unrefined appearance, his unsophisticated way of speaking and acting...

He was far from the kind of man she had imagined for herself.

And yet, something about his words stirred her emotions.

She could sense the sincerity in his eyes, and the pain in his voice made her heart ache.

“I... I don’t know you....”

Coreellia spoke carefully.

“Are you really telling the truth?”

If what Kai was saying was true—if he had really saved her and cared for her—then she could see how she might have fallen for him.

“It’s all true.”

Kai looked her straight in the eyes.

“Coreellia, you may not believe me, but we’ve spent a long time together. I know a lot about you. I know about the birthmark on your left side, and the small scar on your—”

Coreellia immediately reached out to cover Kai’s mouth.

She was flustered that he was revealing such intimate details about her body.

But before she could stop him, Kai easily grabbed her wrist.

“...I also knew you’d react like this. You always do.”

“.....”

Coreellia’s face turned red, and she lowered her head.

Everything Kai had said was true.

She *did* have a birthmark on her left side, and there *was* a small scar on her hip.

“Th-Then... how did I get the scar on my hip? If you can answer that, I’ll believe you.”

“That scar... you got it when you were eight.”

Kai spoke without hesitation.

“The royal garden in your palace is beautifully decorated, and in the center, there’s a small pond. One day, you wanted to climb a tree near that pond so you could look down at the water. A guard tried to stop you, saying it was dangerous, but at the time, you had no fear. You believed you could do anything.

So you climbed the tree.

At first, everything seemed fine. But the moment you tried to lean forward and look down at the pond, your foot slipped.

You fell, hitting your hip hard against the pond’s stone ledge. The pain was so intense that you couldn’t breathe for a moment, and then you started wailing at the top of your lungs.

The guard rushed to pull you out, and you were immediately taken back to the palace for treatment.

The wound wasn’t life-threatening, but it left a small, permanent scar on your hip.

And because of that incident, your father scolded you harshly.”

“.....”

Corellia’s eyes widened as her mouth fell open.

She stared at Kai in shock.

“H-How...?”

She barely managed to get the words out.

“How do you know that...?”

Her hands unconsciously went to her hip.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

“No one... No one else knows about that... It was too embarrassing, so I never told anyone....”

She could still vividly remember that day.

At eight years old, ignoring the guard's warnings, she had climbed that tree—only to fall and hurt herself.

She had cried so hard from the pain, and her father had been furious.

Kai then spoke softly.

“You told me yourself, Corellia... You said that if you ever lost your memories, telling you this story would make you believe me... You told me yourself....”

Tears started streaming down Kai's face.

“You....”

Corellia slowly approached him and wrapped her arms around him.

“You really do know me... You really did save me and take care of me... Thank you....”

“Corellia....”

“I'm sorry I don't remember... I'm so sorry....”

“It's okay... It's not your fault....”

As the two embraced, Ariel lifted her head and looked up at the sky.

The dark clouds loomed overhead.

The rain and storm raged on.

It was like the end of the world was approaching.

And if Kai was right, then this island really was nearing its doom.

“...Big Sis, what are you going to do?”

Lu asked quietly.

Perhaps because of Kai's story, Lu's eyes were slightly red.

“That guy... he’s so pitiful. Being the only one who remembers, carrying all that pain alone....”

“He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

Lakia spoke up.

“The real villains here are the islanders.”

Rather than feeling sad, Lakia looked angry.

“Ariel, why don’t we punish that Sea God?”

At Lakia’s words, Sparky let out an eerie laugh.

“...Hehe. That sounds good, Master. Let’s make that wretched god pay. In the most gruesome and merciless way possible.”

“.....”

Ariel didn’t answer.

She just stared at Kai.

Punishing the Sea God was fine, but something still felt off.

Why was Kai the only one who retained his memories?

And why did the Sea God curse this island in the first place?

The villagers had offered Corellia as a sacrifice to appease the Sea God.

But instead of calming his anger, he placed an even crueler curse on the island—one that forced its people to die endlessly, over and over again.

Why?

“.....”

Ariel had a feeling that there was still a deeper truth hidden beneath all of this.

—
Whoosh!

Braving the torrential downpour, Kai led the group forward.

The fierce storm shook the trees, and the ground was slick with rainwater.

They were heading toward the highest point of the island—where the temple of the Sea God, Nereias, stood.

‘...What does she plan to do once she meets the Sea God?’

Kai didn’t understand, but he silently guided Ariel and the others toward the temple.

Before long, they arrived at its entrance.

Kai turned to Ariel.

“...This is the temple of Nereias.”

Despite the raging storm, the temple stood firm.

At the entrance, two massive stone pillars loomed, and a thick stone door blocked the way.

Normally, it would take a group of strong men to even budge it.

But Ariel simply placed her hand on the door—

And it slid open effortlessly.

“.....”

Kai and Corellia both stared in disbelief.

“Wait here,” Ariel said.

“I’ll be right back.”

Then, without hesitation, she stepped inside the temple alone.

Chapter 178: The Sea God's Curse (8)

Step, step.

Ariel walked into the dimly lit temple.

The inside was filled with an eerie and ominous presence.

Bones, seemingly from animals, were scattered across the floor, and the walls were covered with depictions of various sea creatures entangled with grotesque monsters.

It felt less like a temple and more like a cursed space.

The sound of rain and storm outside gradually faded, replaced by the distant dripping of water.

As Ariel moved toward the center of the temple, she spotted a pool of water, deep and still like a lake.

“...Nereias, show yourself.”

Her quiet voice echoed through the chamber.

But no response came.

Ariel stepped closer to the water's edge and peered in.

The depths were impossibly dark, as though concealing an endless abyss.

As she continued staring, a massive shadow slithered past deep beneath the surface.

Its exact shape and size were indiscernible, but it gave off the

impression of an enormous serpent.

It revealed itself for only a fleeting moment before disappearing once more into the abyss.

Ariel began undressing.

It seemed she would have to enter the water to confront whatever lurked below.

In the dim temple, she took a deep breath and plunged into the pool.

Splash—!

Underwater, everything was silent, as if the outside world no longer existed.

The water clung to her skin with an almost viscous texture, but she remained unfazed, descending steadily.

The surroundings grew darker and darker until even her own hands were no longer visible.

It was as if she had entered an infinite, starless void.

And at the center of that void, Ariel waited.

The massive entity she had glimpsed before was slowly making its presence known.

It slithered, curling around her, its movements eerily smooth, as if studying her.

Ariel cast a divine spell.

“Holy Light.”

A brilliant white radiance erupted outward.

Fwooooosh!

The pure light shone with sacred energy, instantly dispelling the

surrounding darkness.

And in that moment, the creature's form was revealed.

It was of unimaginable size.

Its body, covered in black scales, stretched endlessly, and its head was an unholy fusion of a serpent and a fish.

Ariel immediately knew.

This was the Sea God, **Nereias**.

The aura emanating from him was unmistakably divine.

Seemingly startled by her magic, Nereias attempted to retreat.

But he had already stepped into Ariel's domain.

His massive body was caught in her telekinetic hold, leaving him completely immobilized.

[**W-who... are you...?**]

His voice rumbled through the water.

Ariel gave no verbal response.

Instead, she tightened her telekinetic grip and ascended toward the surface.

Although she could hold her breath indefinitely, something about the deep waters felt suffocating.

The moment she emerged, Ariel calmly began putting her clothes back on.

Meanwhile, Nereias had been flung into a corner of the temple.

Now fully visible, his body was colossal.

Even while coiled, he stretched dozens of meters, and his head alone was large enough to swallow a person whole.

Dressed once more, Ariel approached the god, droplets of water still trickling from her silver hair.

Nereias watched her warily, his elongated pupils trembling.

[You... You are the one who split the sea's storm and broke through this island's barrier... What do you seek?]

"I want to break the curse on this island."

[...Why?]

"The people here are suffering."

[Why would someone as powerful as you care about the suffering of mere mortals? You do not even live on this island.]

Ariel didn't answer.

Instead, she released her telekinetic hold, allowing Nereias to move freely.

The god let out a deep sigh, shaking his massive head before slithering closer to Ariel.

His serpentine eyes bore into her.

[...You truly wish to break the curse on this island?]

"Yes."

[...Then there is a price to pay. I am the Sea God, Nereias. I do not grant favors without tribute. That is the law of the ocean.]

Ariel reached into her inventory and pulled out several macarons.

"These are delicious...."

[Khahahaha!]

Nereias burst into roaring laughter.

[Do you mock me? You think you can lift my curse with mere confections? Impossible. If you truly wish to break my curse—]

His eyes gleamed ominously.

[Then surrender your body to me. Your flesh is small, but it looks quite delectable.]

He flicked his tongue, slithering around Ariel as if savoring the thought.

Ariel furrowed her brows.

“That’s not happening.”

[Then I refuse as well. I will not lift my curse. Leave this island now, or perish with it. Hmph.]

Ariel once again used telekinesis, locking Nereias in place.

Despite being immobilized, he maintained a smug composure.

[Oh? So you plan to resolve this through force? Foolish. I am the Sea God, Nereias. Once my decree is set, it cannot be overturned. If you do not offer a proper tribute, I will change nothing. Even if you manage to overpower me—]

Schwing.

Ariel drew **Ragnarok** from her inventory.

The moment the colossal sword emerged, Nereias’s eyes trembled.

But he quickly regained his composure.

[...No matter what you do, you cannot change fate. Even if you kill me, my curse will remain, and in time, I will return. That is the nature of gods. You are nothing compared to me.]

“...I know.”

Ariel inspected the blade of Ragnarok, then casually swung it in the

air.

“I killed you once before. You came back after some time.”

Nereias’s expression stiffened.

[**K-killed... who...?**]

“There’s a way.”

Ariel locked eyes with him.

“I can **seal your essence** into an object. Then you won’t resurrect.”

[**T-that’s impossible...!**]

Nereias recoiled in disbelief.

[**Sealing a god’s essence? That requires an unimaginable amount of power—perhaps even the power of the World Tree itself—**]

Woooong—!

At that moment, Ariel’s mana erupted.

A divine radiance enveloped the temple, turning everything around them blue with raw energy.

A surge of overwhelming force poured forth.

[**W-what is this...?!**]

For the first time, true fear flickered in Nereias’s eyes.

His voice quivered as he asked:

[**...Who... are you?**]

Ariel simply smiled.

—

In the end, Nereias yielded.

At first, he resisted.

But when Ariel's mana began shifting into **divine energy**, his resolve shattered.

He had never witnessed such a terrifyingly vast force.

His arrogance vanished, replaced by reverence.

Now, his mannerisms were completely different.

[I will lift the curse, but there is one problem.]

Nereias, now coiled humbly, hesitated.

[Even if I remove my curse, the island will still sink. The people here will all perish. In truth, they have already died. They merely exist, trapped in an endless cycle of fate.]

Ariel remained silent.

“...It can't be helped.”

She spoke softly, her voice tinged with sorrow.

Seeing this, Nereias suddenly perked up.

[...There is one person I can save. The woman who once made a contract with me. Her soul belongs to me, and she has never truly died.]

Ariel's eyes flickered.

“...Are you talking about Corellia?”

[...I do not know her name, but she was the beautiful human woman whom the islanders once sacrificed to me.]

Now, Ariel understood everything.

Corellia had made a deal with Nereias.

Chapter 179: The Sea God's Curse (9)

A short time had passed since Ariel entered the temple.

Wooong—!

Suddenly, an intense energy burst from within the temple.

The ground and air trembled, and the entire temple was engulfed in a bluish light.

“What... what is this...?”

Kai instinctively stepped back at the overwhelming presence he had never felt before.

Next to him, Lu spoke calmly.

“No need to worry. That’s just my sister revealing her power.”

“.....?”

Kai’s face was filled with disbelief.

The bluish light pouring out of the temple was so powerful that it felt as if it could overturn the entire world.

“That little girl... has this kind of power...?”

Hearing his murmured words, Lakia smirked.

“Now that Ariel-sama has revealed her power, that sea god won’t be able to do a thing. The curse on this island will be lifted soon enough.”

“...The curse will be lifted?”

Kai turned his gaze toward Corellia.

A heavy weight settled in his chest.

‘...Then I really will never see Corellia again.’

If the curse was broken, the island would sink forever beneath the sea.

Kai, along with all the island’s inhabitants, would never come back.

“...That’s wonderful news, Kai.”

Corellia smiled shyly.

“When the curse is broken, let’s leave this island together and start anew.”

Her words made Kai’s smile turn bitter.

Corellia had no idea what the curse truly entailed.

The curse placed upon the island by the sea god, Nereias.

The reason Kai alone retained his memories.

It was all because Corellia had made a deal with the sea god.

But she must never know that.

If she realized that Kai had suffered for so long because of her deal, she would be consumed by guilt.

“Whoa?”

Lu looked up at the sky.

“The storm clouds are disappearing.”

Kai followed his gaze.

The dark clouds were slowly receding.

Sunlight began to pierce through the gaps, casting a golden glow.

The endless rain finally subsided, leaving the surroundings fresh and serene.

It was as if they had awakened from a nightmare.

Corellia gazed up in awe.

“...It’s beautiful.”

The sunlight reflected on her face made her look even more radiant.

“The curse really has been broken.”

Kai nodded silently at her words.

At that moment, tears began to stream from his eyes.

“Kai...?”

Corellia reached out and gently wiped his tears away.

“Why are you crying...?”

Kai couldn’t answer.

Even he wasn’t sure.

Were they tears of relief, because the long-enduring curse had finally been lifted?

Or were they tears of sorrow, knowing he would never see Corellia again?

Perhaps both.

But one thing was certain—everything was coming to an end.

Kai turned to look at the sea.

The once violent waters were now calm, shimmering peacefully under the sunlight.

But Kai could feel it—the end was near.

A faint tremor had been rumbling beneath his feet for a while now.

The island was already beginning to sink.

“...Corellia.”

Kai smiled at her.

He didn't want to sadden her, but he had to say his final goodbye.

After all, they would never meet again.

“...Saving you, treating your wounds—it was the best decision I ever made.”

Kai held back his tears as he continued.

“If I could go back, I'd make the same choice every time. I would save you again and again. So... I have no regrets. I don't regret meeting you. I don't regret loving you. Even though the future we dreamed of won't come true, I was truly happy to have met you. So, Corellia... thank you.”

Memories of their time together flooded Kai's mind.

Nursing her wounds and falling in love.

Dreaming about their future beyond the island.

They were the most precious and happiest moments of his life.

Boom, boom—!

A deep rumbling shook the island.

Corellia stumbled in surprise, and Kai immediately pulled her into his arms.

“...It’ll be over soon, Corellia.”

Hearing his words, she slowly wrapped her arms around him as well.

Then, in a trembling voice, she whispered—

“...Thank you, Kai.”

Perhaps she had sensed something from his tone.

“...I’m sorry I couldn’t remember... and...”

Boom!

The temple of the sea god Nereias collapsed entirely.

And from within, Ariel strode out.

“...Sister!”

“Ariel-sama!”

“Mom!”

Lu, Lakia, and Mia all ran toward her.

At that moment, something massive rose behind Ariel.

A colossal serpent-like figure shot into the sky.

The sea god, Nereias.

He ascended high above, then vanished into the clouds.

It was as if he had transcended.

Kai held Corellia tightly in his arms and quietly watched Ariel approach.

She now stood before him.

“...Thank you,” Kai said.

“For breaking the curse....”

He had no idea what she had done, but the storm had stopped, the island was sinking, and the sea god had disappeared.

The curse had been lifted.

Kai felt a strange sensation in his body.

His consciousness was growing faint, as if his soul were slipping away.

The end was here.

“...Corellia.”

Kai looked at her one last time.

Her face was soaked with tears.

“This is really....”

Just as Kai was about to speak, Corellia pressed her lips against his.

“.....”

A faint smile formed on Kai’s lips.

Then, his body went limp.

“...Hic... hic...”

Corellia held onto him and sobbed.

“Kai... hic...!!”

Beside them, Ariel raised a hand and gently swept it through the air.

Her fingertips shimmered with a pure white glow.

“Pure Soul.”

As Ariel murmured, the light in her hand exploded outward.

Boom!

A pillar of dazzling radiance shot down from the heavens.

Corellia, Lakia, Lu, and Mia all instinctively took a step back.

The **Pure Soul** spell—Ariel had once used it to purify the World Tree.

A supreme divine magic that could cleanse a soul, erasing all curses and sins, returning it to its purest form.

Within the radiant column, Ariel knelt and placed a hand on Kai's forehead.

His body was enveloped in white light.

“...Ugh....”

A moment later, his eyes slowly opened.

The pillar of light began to fade.

“...What the...?”

Kai looked around in confusion.

Ariel gave him a small smile and said—

“It's time to leave this island.”

Fwoosh.

A teleportation spell activated, and everyone vanished from the scene.

Before the Sea God's Temple Collapsed—

[What will you do? Will you break the curse on this island... and the curse on that man?]

At Nereias's question, Ariel hesitated.

According to him, Corellia could be saved, but Kai could not.

[...Even if I lift the curse, his soul will remain bound to this island. That is the price of defying the laws of nature. There's nothing I can do about it.]

Nereias lowered his head apologetically.

Ariel gently patted his large, round head.

“Then... what if I purify Kai's soul?”

[Purify his soul...?]

Nereias fell into deep thought.

[If you do that...]

He hesitated, realizing something.

[...Yes. If you purify his soul, he can leave this island. But it's not easy. Purifying a soul requires an immense amount of holy energy—]

Nereias suddenly stopped speaking.

Because Ariel had already demonstrated power far beyond anything he had ever encountered.

[Ah...! Perhaps... you truly can save him!]

Nereias exclaimed excitedly.

[Purify his soul, then bind it back to his body! You can do it!]

Ariel nodded quietly.

She had purified the World Tree before.

Surely, she could save Kai, too.

“Break the curse.”

[Understood.]

And thus, everything was set in motion.

Chapter 180: It Was Fun (The End)

The island eventually sank into the cold depths of the sea.

Now that the sea god Nereias' curse was lifted, it would never surface again.

Perhaps, far in the future, someone like Lu would come across an ancient map marking the island's location and attempt to uncover its traces.

With advanced technology, they might even explore the deep ocean and find remnants of the island.

But that would be a story for a distant future.

The reason behind the island's sinking would remain an unsolved mystery, as it had been an unnatural event brought about by the sea god Nereias.

Having escaped via teleportation, Ariel and her companions arrived at the eastern port.

Originally, they had planned to return straight to the Evergreen Forest, but they decided to stop by the eastern region first—for Corellia's sake.

She needed to see for herself what had become of her kingdom and how the world had changed.

Corellia was overwhelmed by the drastic changes in the eastern port.

To her, only a few days had passed, yet her kingdom had vanished,

and centuries had gone by.

In the end, she collapsed to the ground, weeping.

Kai gently patted her shoulder, comforting her.

After all, he too had lost his homeland to the sea.

“...Let’s start over, Corellia.”

After shedding tears for a long while, Corellia took Kai’s hand and stood up.

Her kingdom and family were gone, but she wasn’t completely alone.

Kai was by her side—the one who had endured countless deaths to protect and care for her.

“...Let’s start again, Kai.”

Wiping her tears, Corellia smiled.

There was no way to turn back time.

She had to accept the present and move forward.

A few days later, Kai and Corellia settled in the Imperial Capital.

Princess Iliana, having heard their story, provided them with a mansion to live in.

They were planning to hold their wedding soon and decide on how to move forward with their lives.

At one time, Corellia had been a princess, and Kai had never left his island.

Adjusting to life in the empire wouldn’t be easy for either of them.

However, with the help of Hero Sion, Clara, and Saintess Levana—

who was staying at a nearby monastery—they wouldn't have too much trouble.

Meanwhile, having returned from their adventure, Lu immediately began writing a new book.

This journey had been anything but ordinary, so it was sure to make waves once published.

Especially the revelation that the princess of the long-fallen Asla Kingdom was still alive.

People would be shocked.

Princess Iliana was already making plans.

"When Lu's book is released, we should hold an exhibition at the royal museum again. It'd be so fun if Corellia made a public appearance there."

Corellia smiled and nodded.

"I think it would be fun."

She had been a princess once.

Standing before an audience didn't intimidate her.

In fact, she enjoyed it.

"I'd love to see people's reactions."

"As expected, Corellia, you and I get along so well."

There was a natural connection between Iliana and Corellia, both being of royal blood.

Corellia then turned to Kai with a bright expression.

"Kai, you'll come too, right?"

"Ah, um, I..."

“Come with me. Let’s also announce our wedding there. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to receive everyone’s blessings?”

“...I wouldn’t mind a quiet ceremony, though.”

Unlike Corellia, Kai wasn’t fond of standing in the public eye.

Having lived his whole life on a secluded island, he found the idea of being the center of attention embarrassing.

“...But alright. If it’s what you want, Corellia, I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Kai.”

As the two gazed into each other’s eyes, their hands intertwined, Iliana smiled softly.

“You both look so happy.”

At Iliana’s words, Corellia blushed and quickly looked away.

“Oh dear, I forgot myself in front of Your Highness.”

“It’s fine. It’s nice to see. Honestly, I’m a little jealous.”

“Didn’t you recently get engaged as well, Your Highness?”

“Ah, yes.”

This time, it was Iliana who blushed.

“Lord Carl finally proposed to me.”

“That’s wonderful! Congratulations. I heard he’s incredibly handsome.”

Carl Kastak, the Northern Grand Duke, had recently proposed to Princess Iliana with his family’s ancestral ring.

Iliana had joyfully accepted his proposal.

She had once been curious about the elf girl Carl had supposedly harbored feelings for.

Had he truly let go of those feelings?

But in the end, she decided it didn't matter.

After all, he had chosen her.

'I won in the end.'

Iliana smiled to herself.

Meanwhile, the one who had unknowingly lost to Iliana was currently in Delight, listening to Hero Sion.

"I don't know how to tell Levana how I feel... I don't want to make her uncomfortable. What if I confess, and she rejects me? Things would get so awkward between us. Levana visits our house often to see Clara, and we're in the same hero party. If the demon army attacks, we'll have to fight together...."

As he listened, Ariel absentmindedly chewed on her cake.

Lu was busy working on his book today, and Lakia was preoccupied repairing Skadi's Ice Castle.

Ariel had been spending the day leisurely swimming with Mia at the lake when Sion dragged her here, promising cake, saying he needed advice.

"...You're closest to Levana, Ariel. You're also her sworn guardian knight. I really need your help."

Ariel had no idea how to respond.

Matters of the heart were difficult for her.

Conquering the continent seemed easier than solving this problem.

"...Ariel, how should I tell Levana how I feel? I wrote a letter, but I think it'd be better to tell her in person. But that's not easy... I've tried a few times, but I get nervous and mess up. If I stutter when

confessing, it'll make me look pathetic. I don't want Levana to see me that way...."

Fighting off the drowsiness from her full stomach, Ariel muttered—

"...If she can feel your sincerity, it'll work. Probably."

That was the best advice she could offer.

Sion pondered for a moment before his face brightened.

"Then I should be honest and confess in person. I'm meeting Levana tomorrow for tea. She actually said yes when I invited her."

"...Good luck."

Ariel wasn't sure how things would turn out.

But since Levana didn't seem to dislike Sion, maybe there was a chance.

With that last thought, Ariel slowly closed her eyes.

Sleepiness overtook her.

Sion wasn't surprised.

He had seen Ariel fall asleep mid-meal before.

He reached out to wake her but suddenly remembered something Levana had once said—

If Ariel falls asleep while eating, just let her be. She'll wake up soon enough.

"...."

Sion decided to follow Levana's advice.

He let Ariel sleep.

Sure enough, she woke up about an hour later.

Sion gave her a grateful look.

“...Thanks, Ariel. I think I found the courage I needed.”

“...Take care.”

Ariel waved him off and turned away.

With her stomach full and her nap complete, she felt refreshed.

Her next destination—

The Black Market.

Now that she was in the capital, she planned to sell Triton's corpse.

As she left the Black Market, Ariel's lips curled into a satisfied smile.

Triton's corpse had fetched a far higher price than she had expected.

The auction had been fierce, and in the end, Count Astral, a high-ranking noble, had purchased it.

Having read *The Abyss of the Sea: The Legend of the Asla Kingdom*, Count Astral believed Triton to be the legendary golden-tailed sea monster from the book.

His winning bid set a record-high price in Black Market history.

Feeling pleased, Ariel decided to buy delicious food for everyone as a celebration.

But before that, she had one more stop to make—

Biblia Printing Press.

She was finally going to meet Biblia.

Ariel arrived at the shop and pushed the door open.

A languid voice greeted her, as if carried by the wind.

“You’ve come.”

A woman sat in the corner of the shop.

Long black hair. Deep black eyes.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

Ariel felt something stir within her.

A strange feeling—like finding someone she had been searching for, for a very long time.

The woman stood up and asked gently—

“How was your adventure?”

Ariel didn’t answer right away.

Her gaze shifted to an object on the desk.

A familiar item—one that did not belong in this world.

“...It was fun.”

As she spoke, tears welled in Ariel’s eyes and began to fall.